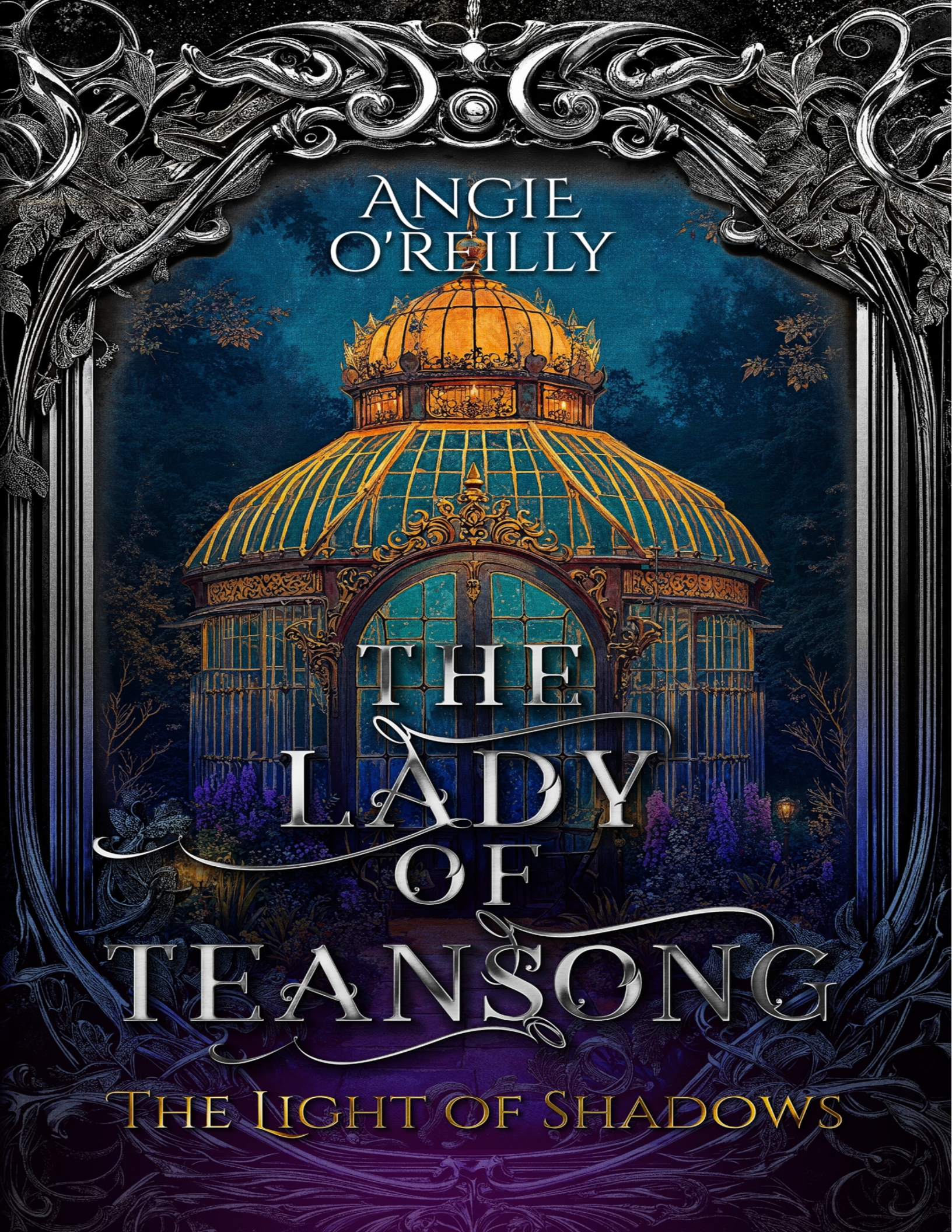
ANGIE
O'REILLY
THE
LADY
OF
TEANSONG
THE LIGHT OF SHADOWS

THE LADY OF TEANSONG

THE LIGHT OF SHADOWS

ANGIE
O'REILLY

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First edition 2024

To Tenaha
You are my constellation

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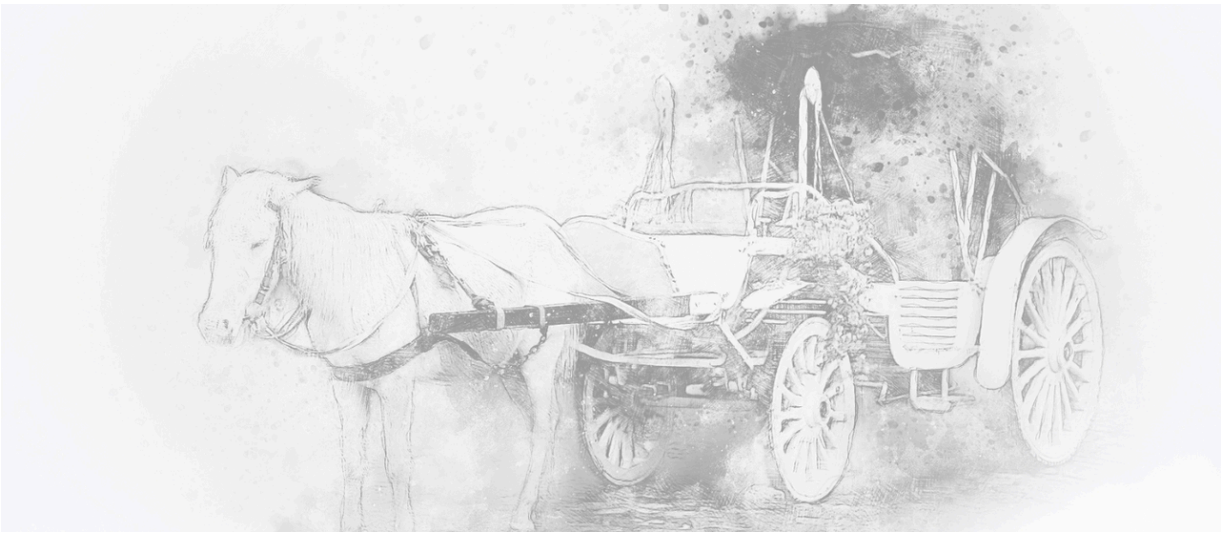

BILE BURNED KALLESSA'S THROAT as the carriage lurched over another muddy rut. She swallowed hard, her fingers digging into the plush seats. *I will not vomit. I will not vomit.* It had been her mantra for hours, but her churning stomach disregarded her.

Just like everyone else.

"I still don't understand what the problem is," her cousin chirped, interrupting Kallessa's spiraling thoughts. Across from her, Dovina's winter-blue eyes narrowed, her pretty mouth twisting into a pout. Her slender fingers gripped a glossy travel harp in her lap. "A carriage is much more comfortable than riding a horse."

Five years ago, riding in a carriage wouldn't have made her sick.

Five years ago, she'd have been riding in the finest carriage in Dracia, crafted by her father's skilled hands. And would have enjoyed every minute of it.

But that was before the "accident".

The "Wynlar Carriage Accident" to be precise. At least that's what the townsfolk whispered when Kallessa walked by.

She didn't have a name for the day she lost everything.

The carriage hit another bump, and Dovina's harp jangled discordantly. Her cousin let out an annoyed huff, her slender fingers dancing over the strings in a futile attempt to salvage the tune.

Kallessa clamped her jaw shut, fighting a tangle of emotions: anger, desperation, elation, irritation. But above all, nausea. Constant, rolling

nausea.

She released her grip on the upholstered seats and struggled to inhale against the corset digging into her ribs. She had to stop thinking about her past. This was a move forward. It had to be. With trembling hands, Kallessa smoothed down her velvet gown, the most beautiful thing she'd worn in five years. And she absolutely refused to vomit on it.

But if she had to breathe in another paltry lungful of Dovina's cloying rose perfume, it would be all over with. Kallessa yanked aside the lace curtain and swung open the window before sucking in a cool autumn breeze that smelled of damp earth and crisp leaves. Her gaze swept over the unfamiliar landscape beyond the carriage, taking in the rolling hills and vibrant foliage. This place looked nothing like home. The colors were too bold, the trees too tall. Nausea rolled through her again. What was she doing?

The rain of earlier had cleared off, leaving the skies deep blue and the leaves shimmering in gold and russet. Late afternoon sunlight flickered between the aspens as they jolted along the main road to Shemmar, Krithadea. It was a country she'd never laid eyes upon and probably never would have if not for this excursion. She honestly didn't know whether to thank Dovina or strangle her. Probably both.

Ten hours earlier

Kallessa tilted the smelling salt bottle into the morning light of the cottage window, violet light bursting from the bottle and bouncing about the room. This one was her favorite.

"Aunt G, make her listen to me!" Dovina's whine shattered the peaceful moment.

Gevene cleared her throat. "Now, come away from there, Kallessa, you can finish dusting them later." Aunt Gevene sat in her favorite chair, the arms threadbare and faded. It could have once been a gold chair, or maybe brown, but now it was as colorless as her.

With a sigh, Kallessa nestled the bottle among the hundred others teetering on the kitchen windowsill. She turned to face her younger cousin,

whose very presence in the humble cottage usually spelled trouble.

Dovina stood in the middle of the small parlor, as out of place as a rose in a field of weeds. Dressed in a yellow satin gown edged with delicate lace, she exuded an air of obvious wealth. Her golden curls were intricately braided with pristine white ribbons.

In contrast, Kallessa seamlessly blended into the background, her homespun linen frock and mud-stained boots matching the faded wallpaper and rugs.

Her cousin faced Kallessa, one gloved hand on a hip. “Father has told me that soon he will cut off your stipend.”

Kallessa froze.

No, not yet. She needed more time. Her split skirt idea would work, she was sure of it. But she wasn’t ready. What would happen to Aunt Gevene? To her?

Dovina grinned impishly. “Now that I have your attention.”

Kallessa felt her eyes widen, her ears burning. “What-”

Dovina lifted her delicate hand, soft palm out. “Just let me finish.”

Kallessa inhaled deeply and clenched her teeth. It was a wonder her cousin hadn’t caused her to crack a tooth with the games she played. But Uncle Talos now controlled every penny of what was once her father’s estate. And that meant he controlled Kallessa, too.

She swallowed down the resentment and resigned herself to listen.

“The Ravenbluff family is celebrating the Axan Moon Festival, and I was invited!”

“Who?” Hard as Kallessa tried, she couldn’t place the family name. And what did it matter? Dovina had a standing invitation to every event within a fifty league radius, thanks to the Wynlar title.

Dovina huffed. “The royal house of Krithadea?”

Kallessa couldn’t even recall the names of Dracia’s own royal family, let alone those who ruled over distant Krithadea.

Dovina’s braids bounced as she shook her head. “Nevermind, just realize it is very important.”

Of course, Kallessa was the dumb country cousin, no longer welcome in polite society since her downfall.

Dovina continued, “It’s at the family estate, which is rarely open to the public. The twins won’t go with me. They’re both married now. So I want

you to come. And father said you have to go, or he's cutting off your stipend."

Kallessa bit her lip hard, her heart pounding. How many more times would her uncle hold their livelihoods hostage?

She glanced at Aunt Gevene, whose silver hair was pulled tight to her scalp in a simple braid, her watery eyes pinned to her task of darning a worn-out stocking with stubby fingers. As usual, her aunt had tuned out the entire conversation between Kallessa and Dovina, choosing to avoid any potential conflict. Kallessa wished she could do that.

Dovina grasped Kallessa's hands. "Cousin," her voice placating, "just think of the opportunities. Sure, it's unlikely you'll find a husband, but you might have a chance to tell Prince Castien about your split skirt idea. And if he likes it, you could sell it to him. A prince!"

That sounded about as plausible as the prince proposing to her. Yet…

"Then you'd be free of father's demands." Dovina finished.

Freedom. The word tasted foreign on Kallessa's tongue. No more of Uncle Talos's biddings, no more threats of losing the cottage or being tossed out onto the sands of Teansong to fend for herself. What would that be like?

She'd spent countless hours perfecting her split skirt design, convinced that its practicality and elegance would appeal to the discerning ladies of Teansong. Yet every merchant had turned her away, their dismissive glances a stark reminder of her fallen status.

But a stranger, someone who didn't know her family's tragic history, might listen. Even if the possibility was as thin as the few copper coins clinking in her near-empty coin purse, it was still a chance. Hope flickered in her chest, and she struggled to smother it before it grew too bright. She'd learned the hard way not to let her dreams soar.

Dovina continued to gaze at her, her heart, shallow as it was, in her eyes.

"Where is Nadie?" Kallessa asked. Dovina's mousy maid was usually only steps behind her mistress.

"That ninny? Why would I take her when I have you?"

Of course.

"Aunt Gevene? Will you be okay for two weeks without me?" Not that Kallessa had much choice in the matter.

Gevene glanced up, a bland smile on her weathered face. "Oh yes, dear. You girls go have fun." As the half sister of Kallessa's father, Gevene too,

had been cast aside when Uncle Talos seized control of the estate. Yet she never seemed to chafe under his rule. Not like Kallessa.

Kallessa faced Dovina, her voice flat. “Fine.” What did she have to lose? After all, her life had become a series of monotonous tasks under her uncle’s rule, filled with constant fear and uncertainty. The chance to escape that suffocating existence was tempting. “When do we leave?”

Dovina clapped her hands and twirled. “As soon as you change out of those awful rags.”

She marched out the front door, calling to her driver. He strode in, laden with boxes and bags.

“I assumed you wouldn’t say no and had a new wardrobe made for you,” Dovina said, her eyes gleaming. “Now go change so we can leave.”

Two

NEVANDER WORE THE FINEST riding boots Dracian coin could buy, and as riding boots, they were flawless, but as walking boots, they were abysmal.

Each squelching step through the muddy ruts of the road had him questioning the sanity of this trip. His fine woolen socks, soaked through an hour ago, chafed relentlessly against his ankles. He grimaced, fighting the urge to curse aloud.

A plaintive mew drew his attention. Atop Sunu's saddle, Akeela's damp fur shimmered in the fading light, her golden eyes accusing.

"Don't look at me like that," Nevander muttered. "You're the one who decided to stow away." He should have known his cat wouldn't let him make this journey alone. "At least you've got the saddle. Consider yourself fortunate."

Sunu limped beside him, favoring the ankle she'd twisted in a pothole five miles back. Nevander's jaw clenched. The Dracian roads, once impeccably maintained, had fallen into disrepair since the Birazahian war. Another reminder of how much had changed.

Memories of the war threatened to surface, but Nevander shoved them away. Not now. He couldn't think of it now.

Instead, he focused on Castien's letter, the reason for this muddy trek. The news of Queen Lyra hosting the Axan Moon Festival had caught him off guard. No one had celebrated in two years, not since Dane's death and Castien's poisoning.

Castien’s words echoed in his mind. His parents believed the poisoners had been killed, but Castien wasn’t convinced. He’d begged Nevander to join him at the festival and aid in uncovering the truth while fending off his mother’s relentless efforts to marry him off.

Poor Castien. With Dane’s death, he was now the heir to the Krithadean throne, thrust into the role he never wanted. Nevander didn't envy him in the least. As a third son, he was grateful for the buffer between himself and the Dracian crown.

They slogged up one final hill. As they crested it, the lights of the inn twinkled with an inviting glow in the distance, and Nevander sagged in relief.

The sun had already set, the sky turning violet as darkness descended on the landscape. Akeela stretched her paw toward him, letting out a soft mew. He gathered her into his arms, her watchful gaze darting at every rustle in the underbrush.

“I suppose there’s a warm bowl of milk for you too, little stowaway,” he murmured, scratching under her chin as she kneaded his cloak. “Though you were supposed to guard the others for me.”

She flicked her hooded eyes to his as if to say, “I’m your cat, remember?”

Yes, he remembered. He tucked her into his arms and kept walking.

In less than a mile, he would soak his aching body in a hot bath and put some good food in his belly. Everything would be fine.

Everything was not fine.

Kallessa persevered all the way to the inn, but the moment her feet hit solid ground, her stomach rebelled. Stumbling over hidden pebbles, she dashed behind the inn, the rotten odors from picked over scraps and spoiled beer assaulting her nose. Leaning against a tree, she desperately tried to calm her breathing.

It did no good. Hours of swaying and that horridly constricting corset swelled up her throat, and she doubled over and vomited onto the embankment. Through the misery, she begrudgingly appreciated her

cousin's insistence on putting her hair up in a respectable fashion. At least it stayed out of the way of her retching.

As her heaves settled, exhaustion seeped into her limbs. Her entire body ached in ways she didn't know was possible. If the new moon hadn't left the surroundings pitch black, she'd have been tempted to just collapse into the grass. It was a wonder she hadn't tripped over anything in her mad dash as it was. She shivered as cool breezes chilled the sweat on her neck. Please let Dovina have their room by now. Oh, to lie down and be still!

With trembling hands, she lifted her sodden hem and picked her way across the damp grass. At the well beside the entrance, she rinsed her mouth and splashed her face before trudging to the entrance.

But before both feet crossed the threshold, she knew something was wrong. Her cousin was yelling. Kallessa dashed inside, only to come to an abrupt halt at the scene before her.

Dovina's angry words echoed off the wood-beamed ceiling as she stood nose-to-nose with a mountain of a man, heedless of his dangerous scowl. Bronze braids fell to his broad shoulders, and his worn leathers and mud-caked boots marked him as a traveler. In his muscular arms he cradled... a cat? The poor gray feline looked as annoyed as the man holding it. Kallessa knew exactly how the cat felt, having been on the receiving end of Dovina's screeching on many occasions.

Kallessa sighed, pressing her fingertips to her throbbing temple. Of course, Dovina would pick a fight with the first person she saw. She steeled herself and stepped farther into the inn.

Caught in the middle, the innkeeper's shiny bald head swung back and forth, his eyes darting nervously between the two opponents.

"He gave the room to me because you didn't show up," Dovina yelled, jabbing a finger at the innkeeper.

"Yet here I stand." The large man's free hand gestured broadly. Despite his rough appearance, his resonant voice carried a commanding air that made Kallessa's toes curl in her damp slippers. He was breathtaking, all male prowess and power. "You can get another room."

"I'm sorry, sir, that was the last room," the innkeeper's quavering voice came from behind the thick wooden counter that hosted multiple statues of owls. If only Kallessa could hide behind the counter with him.

"It seems," the man said cooly, "that you should have made a reservation as I did."

Dovina's eyes bulged. "My father is Lord Wynlar of Teansong! I don't have to make a reservation."

Kallessa's stomach dropped. Oh, Dovina. Had she really not made a reservation? She held back a groan, holding onto the doorway for support. What a perfect way to end this horrible day.

But they had to give the man his room, even though the thought made her want to cry. And she fully intended to tell Dovina that, but exhaustion stole her voice. She was so tired she couldn't muster up the energy to fight against her cousin, and the thought of not lying down soon made her head spin.

Then Dovina's gaze landed on Kallessa, a calculating gleam entering her eyes. She stalked over, grasped Kallessa's arm, and dragged her forward, her grip lancing pain through Kallessa's skin as she stumbled across the wooden planks. Not until Dovina faced the imposing man did she finally let her go. Kallessa rubbed her arm before raising her eyes to him. Up close, he seemed even taller, his braids in disarray and a wild beard framing piercing green eyes that sparked with irritation.

Dovina thrust her hands towards Kallessa. "Surely you can see that my companion is ill! Would you be so despicable as to make her sleep with the horses? We can't possibly travel any further tonight."

Nevander's jaw clenched as he counted to ten, then twenty in his head. Years at court had honed his control, but this flaxen-haired banshee threatened to unravel it with each pompous word that spewed from her lips.

She was beautiful in an over-bred way that spoke of too much pampering and even though she was young, her waist was corseted tightly, as if to force curves onto a body that had yet to form them.

The urge to put her in her place burned in his throat, but he swallowed it down. Here, he was just another traveler, and that's how he needed to remain.

His gaze shifted to the woman beside her. Even wan and wilted, she was alluring. Black lashes, adorned with droplets of water, framed exotic dark eyes that mirrored the flickering fire in the hearth. Damp mahogany curls

escaping her coiffure framed a face as pale as alabaster, her full lips quivering faintly. Her gown, although well-fitted to her curvy body, was damp and rumpled.

He gazed at her face again. He'd seen that look before, on the faces of seasick sailors he'd once commanded, brave men that were now mere shadows in his past. Her eyelids were threatening to flutter shut right before him and she swayed slightly. She met his eyes, and a shock of awareness ran through him.

He couldn't take the room from her.

Nevander's body ached with the decision he was about to make, but if he didn't, those dark eyes would haunt him. Those plump, kissable lips would whisper guilty pleas to him in his sleep. His jaw clenched.

Then he bid farewell to the luxury of his bath, the smoothness of his sheets, and the comfort of his soft bed.

Forcing evenness into his voice, Nevander flicked his gaze back to the insufferable blond. "Fine. You take the room." The words tasted bitter on his tongue, but it was all he could manage without unleashing a barrage of naval profanities that would make even hardened sailors blush.

Then he strode away, leaving a muddy trail behind him, his feet aching and blisters rubbing.

"You entered the lobby at the perfect time, looking so pale and ill." Dovina's grin glinted in the mirror as she unbraided her hair. "By the way, you do look terrible."

"So happy I could accommodate you," Kallessa mumbled under her breath as she slumped in front of the small table that held their dinner. Its wooden surface had a fat face of an owl carved into it.

The rich aroma of the stew the innkeeper had brought up twisted her stomach. Any other time, such a meal would've been a treat. Now, guilt gnawed at her insides.

She placed the lid over the plate, the clink of metal on ceramic echoing her unease. "Why didn't you have Uncle Talos reserve a room for us?"

“Oh, why bother him with such petty things?” Dovina’s fingers massaged her scalp, working through her curls. “It worked out, didn’t it? Who did that vagabond think he was, anyway?”

Kallessa rubbed her aching eyes. “Did it matter? This room was his.” That was no vagabond. She might not have spent her whole life in society, but she recognized authority when she saw it. Yet, she’d also seen that look of resignation in his eyes when he’d gazed at her. If she hadn’t stumbled into the lobby when she had...

A shiver ran through her. They could’ve spent a sleepless night in the carriage, cold seeping through their clothes. Instead, the crackling fire filled the room with warmth, lanterns casting a cozy glow. In one corner sat a sizable copper tub, and the bed was a luxurious cloud, overstuffed with feathers, adorned with wool blankets and downy pillows. This room promised a blissful night’s sleep. But not for the man who had reserved it.

Dovina continued. “You just don’t understand how things work. My father is very powerful, you know. He could crush this little inn with a letter to the crown.”

Her father. The words struck like a blow.

Five years. Father, Mother, and her little brother, Blain, gone for five years. Kallessa understood that power perfectly. Once, her father had been Lord Wynlar. But he would’ve never used his influence to ruin an honest business over a slight to his daughter. He would’ve slept in his own carriage before putting a man out of his room.

Why was she even on this ill-fated journey? What was Aunt Gevene doing right now without her? Did she even know how to live by herself anymore? This was a stupid idea. To think that some prince in another kingdom would listen to her was absurd. She couldn’t even get the people of Teansong to acknowledge her.

Dovina was seventeen now, the same age Kallessa had been when she’d lost everything. Had she ever been so careless of others’ feelings?

“Help me with these buttons,” Dovina interrupted her thoughts, gesturing toward the back of her gown. Kallessa had stripped out of her own gown and corset as soon as they had gotten settled and she relished every breath she inhaled. Corsets were undeniably instruments of torture, and each dress from Dovina was a reminder, because they wouldn’t fit without one.

Now Kallessa stood in her dressing gown, a blue robe tied about her waist. She deftly unhooked the cloth-covered buttons down the back of

Dovina's gown and quickly unlaced her corset.

Dovina sighed in relief. "It does feel good to breathe, doesn't it?"

Kallessa held Dovina's skirts as she stepped out of them. "Why do we wear these awful things?"

"For fashion, of course." Dovina's blithe response hung in the air. Kallessa couldn't have disagreed more.

Three

NEVANDER SLUMPED BY THE crackling fire in the main hall, the warmth slowly seeping back into his bones. His wool socks draped over his boots, steam rising from them in the heat of the flames. He'd cleaned the mud caked on his boots and rinsed out his socks earlier at the stone well in the courtyard, but there was little hope for his travel-stained cloak and breeches other than to let them slowly dry by the fire.

The hearty stew and fresh bread he'd devoured earlier sat heavy in his stomach, making his eyelids droop. He stretched his aching feet closer to the glowing embers, feeling the occasional sting of an errant spark.

As he scanned the room through half-lidded eyes, the flickering lanterns cast eerie shadows on the time-worn tables. The new innkeeper's obsession with owls was evident everywhere. A row of wooden owls had replaced the landscape painting above the fireplace, each one smaller than the last. Stuffed owls hung from the walls and ceiling, their wings frozen mid-flight, their vacant glass eyes seeming to follow his every move. Nevander never understood the need to decorate with dead things. He'd seen enough death and there was no beauty in it.

In the corner, a young man hunched over a bowl and mug, his own boots and cloak faded and worn. His raggedly cut blond hair framed a face full of premature lines. He lifted his arm to reach for his mug, but it was merely a stub, cut off from the elbow down. The man's eyes lingered on his empty sleeve, momentarily perplexed, before he reached out and took hold of the cup with his other hand.

Something dark coiled around Nevander's chest. How many men came back from the war, missing pieces of themselves? How many men never came back at all? How many wives and children still cried themselves to sleep at night?

He didn't deserve to be in the same room as that man. Not after what he'd done. Nevander rose abruptly, gathering his clothes and shoving his feet into his damp boots with jerky movements.

At the clerk's desk, he paid for a pitcher of milk and some dried meat, then hesitated before dropping two silver crowns on the counter. "This is for whatever that man in the corner eats. And give him the rest of the change."

The stable's familiar scents of hay and horse sweat greeted him as he checked on Sunu. The mare nuzzled his hand, and he allowed himself a grim smile. At least she didn't judge him for his past.

A soft meow announced Akeela's arrival. The cat dropped a mouse at his feet and sat expectantly. Nevander knelt, running his fingers through her soft fur. "You can have that. I'm full. But I brought you some milk, if you're still hungry."

As Akeela lapped up the warm milk, her tail twitching with excitement, Nevander stepped outside into the crisp night air. He lifted his gaze to the constellation of Enkin's ship in the northern sky, its seven bright stars as familiar as his own hand. As a boy, he'd spent countless nights tracing that outline, dreaming of adventure. Now, it only reminded him of everything he'd lost.

He hadn't been on a ship in over a year, and the mere thought of it still made him ill.

Although not as ill as that woman appeared to be in the lobby earlier. Despite her pallor, her beauty had been undeniable - freckles dancing across golden skin, full lips, and large, dark eyes that spoke to something inside of him. Something he shoved away.

Was she lying in the bed that was meant for him right now? Enjoying the large copper tub that should have been his?

Nevander's jaw clenched. She was lucky to have arrived when she did, or her screeching companion would have spent the night in their opulent carriage. His eyes narrowed as he took in the polished wood and gold trim, the large crest with a stylized W.

Why did the name Wynlar sound familiar? It seemed like he'd heard a story about that family once, but he was too tired to dredge it up from his

weary mind.

Fatigue weighed him down as he gave Sunu one last brush. Where was he going to rest? He couldn't face that one-armed soldier in the lobby again. Sleep wouldn't find him there.

Rubbing the back of his aching neck, he glanced around the small stable. He'd slept in worse places. Nevander tossed his saddle blanket over a bed of fresh hay in a corner and sunk down, leaning his head against the weathered wood of the stable wall. A few stems of hay stabbed him in the back and he punched them down before resettling. This was going to be rough. But at least here, he could let his guard down.

As Nevander closed his eyes, he prayed for peace, even for one night. But in the darkness behind his eyelids, the ghosts of his past waited to haunt his dreams once more.

Kallessa couldn't sleep. She'd lain in the soft bed next to Dovina for hours, listening to the creaking of cooling boards and the distant sounds of night. Her cousin had fallen into a deep sleep shortly after they'd settled in, but it eluded her, and she knew why.

This wasn't her bed.

Her actual bed was miles away in a cottage by the beach, where open windows let in the sound of rhythmic waves breaking on the shore.

She remembered her mother when she heard the sounds of the beach. They'd collected shells in the pink predawn light when the world was new and fresh and anything was possible. Her tiny mother, barefooted and laughing, running along the beach, pointing out hermit crabs as they buried their crusty bodies back into the sand as the sun came up.

But this place was foreign, and quiet. If she listened intently, she could hear the trickle of the brook behind the inn, an owl's hoot in the woods, a horse whinny in the barn.

But that wasn't really the problem.

This wasn't her bed because it belonged to that burly man from the lobby. Where was he now? As the dying coals in the fireplace dimmed, a chill crept through the room. She pulled the blanket higher to her chin as she

fought with herself. It wasn't right, what they'd done, and if she didn't try in some small way to make it right, she'd never sleep a wink.

Her head throbbed dully as she rose, careful not to disturb her cousin, and pushed her feet into slippers. She didn't want to explain what she was about to do. Dovina wouldn't understand, anyway. Slipping into her robe and grabbing an extra blanket, Kallessa padded into the hallway, cool air swirling around her bare ankles.

How late was it? She didn't recall seeing a clock earlier, her attention consumed by that man who'd dominated the lobby. She had to stop referring to him as 'that man,' but how else could she think of him?

He'd towered over her, wild braided hair and a bronze beard that would have looked ragged on another man, but on him, it looked perfect. His eyes were a mesmerizing blend of light and dark green, flecked with silver and amber, like a summer leaf caught in the morning sun. Despite his obvious exhaustion, he'd stood ramrod straight. No, there hadn't been a relaxed bone in his body, and when she'd stumbled upon him and Dovina arguing, he'd knocked the breath from her already queasy stomach.

Virile. That was the word. Not like–no. She wouldn't think about *him* now.

Her slippered feet whispered across the polished wood floor and down the stairs. The lobby and dining hall were silent, the lanterns extinguished. Only faint embers glowed in the fireplace, leaving a hint of wood smoke in the air. She scanned the room, half-expecting to find him asleep on a chair or a bench, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Had he left? Surely not. It would be foolish to travel at night. That left the stable. But why choose that over the inn's comfort? Only one way to find out. A shiver of nervousness raced across her skin, but she shoved it aside.

Kallessa creaked open the front door and stepped into the moonless night. The chill air whipped her curls into her face and swirled the hem of her dressing gown. The night felt different here, more closed off, full of land and trees and creatures, unlike the one she left behind. No damp, salty breeze here. Everything smelled like soil and moss and leaves.

The trail to the barn wasn't paved as she'd hoped, but packed dirt, damp from recent rain. She should have worn boots, but she didn't know she'd be traipsing across the grounds. Too late now.

The stars cast a faint glow on her surroundings, providing just enough light for Kallessa to navigate her way. As she stepped inside the stable, the

comforting scents of hay and horses filled the air. She inhaled deeply, memories of childhood flooding back. She missed her horses. Her mother had raised and bred the finest Reykian horses in all of Dracia. But that was all gone now.

A single lantern illuminated the stable. In a dim corner, she spotted the man's dark form curled on a pile of hay, head resting against the wall. That looked uncomfortable, to say the least. And while he was out here shivering in the cold, Dovina was sound asleep in a soft, warm bed.

A horse shuffled its feet as she picked her way over to the slumbering man. He looked less fierce as he slept in his stocking feet, those piercing green eyes closed. A slight tremor ran through his limbs as a cold gust blew through. His eyelids twitched, lips quivering as if he was caught in a nightmare.

Kallessa's heart clenched. He must have been exhausted to fall asleep like that. Maybe the blanket would help. She'd just drape it over him and leave. No one would even know she'd been here.

Carefully unrolling the blanket, she squatted down. She leaned forward, arms spread wide–

Suddenly, her world tilted. Her back slammed into the hay as she gasped for breath, flailing in confusion. A heavy weight pinned her, imprisoning her arms to her sides like iron manacles. Her long curls flung across her face, blinding her.

She opened her mouth to scream, but a calloused hand clamped over it, as unyielding as the arm that had snared her. Kallessa's heart raced, thundering in her chest like a stampede of wild horses, but her body was frozen. Frantic thought flitted across her mind begging her to move, do something! Her muscles tensed, quivering with the urge to fight or flee, yet she remained paralyzed, sparks flying in front of her unseeing eyes.

She couldn't move. That one thought spiraled through her as desperate breaths fought to escape her lips.

A stifled whimper rose from her throat, raw and animalistic, a sound she didn't recognize as her own.

Then everything went still. Dead still. Silence enveloped them as she heard a harsh breath over the pounding of her own heart. In a single moment, Kallessa felt a thousand sensations. His sleep warmed skin burning against hers, his thundering heartbeat matching her own, the

tension in every corded muscle pressed against her. His feral scent of leather and sweat filled her nostrils.

The hand jerked away from her mouth. The iron grip relaxed, and she was hauled upright with a haste that suggested regret–or fear. She gasped in air, her trembling breath tumbling from her lips as her vision cleared. But she couldn't gather a single coherent thought to save her life.

His arms were no longer a prison, but cradled her lower back as his body trembled against hers. His ragged breath fanned her night-chilled skin. The rough fabric of his clothes scraped her robe, sending new sensations skittering across her flesh. He gripped her tighter, as if needing an anchor, then spoke words that reverberated through her bones.

"Never..." His voice, a harsh whisper that sent a tremble racing across her skin, held a tremor of its own, raw with hyper-alertness. "Never sneak up on a soldier, girl."

Four

NEVANDER'S EARS ROARED WITH the pounding of his own blood. Vivid, gruesome scenes flashed before his eyes, each more haunting than the last. He gasped for air, thick with the stench of fear and adrenaline. His muscles coiled tight, nerves crackling with tension as he fought to regain control over his trembling body.

Bile rose in his throat. He forced slow, deep breaths, struggling to anchor himself in reality.

War had honed his instincts to a lethal edge, his senses heightened by the slightest movement or sound. Even after a year, his body remembered, reacting to the slightest disturbance. But it wasn't an enemy he'd captured in his arms. It was a frightened woman.

Her soft, warm body pressed against him, curves molding to his frame. The floral scent of her hair made his head swim with dangerous longing. Her heart raced against his chest, her breaths quick and shallow.

What was he doing?

He released her, his hands shaking as he set her back on her feet. Without thinking, he brushed back the dark curls framing her exquisite face, his fingers grazing the front of her dressing gown.

Beneath it, she wore only a gauzy white chemise that clung to her golden skin, revealing more than it concealed. Nevander's mouth went dry as his gaze traced that line downward. Heat crept up his neck and he stumbled back, desperate to put distance between them before he did something stupid. Or more stupid than he'd already done.

As he let go, she wobbled, hands flailing for balance. Their eyes locked and he instinctively grasped her wrists, electricity shooting through his fingertips. Her eyes widened, a mix of fear and... something else.

“Shhh, it’s alright,” Nevander murmured, his voice husky. “I’m sorry, my lady. You startled me, that’s all.” The words felt inadequate, clumsy on his tongue.

She yanked her wrists free, shoving her curls back from those large, expressive eyes that had so entranced him. With a huff, she stomped away from the hay onto solid ground.

Her plump lips parted in a breathless gasp, the thin chemise rising and falling with each ragged breath. Nevander’s own breath hitched, a spark of desire igniting low in his belly.

“Forgive me,” he whispered again, raising his palms in surrender. She didn’t seem to hear him, or if she did, she gave no sign. He remained rooted to the spot, afraid any movement might spook her further.

Those captivating golden eyes held him transfixed. In the flickering lantern light, they seemed to harbor secrets, stories waiting to be unraveled. But, as he watched, her face grew paler with each passing moment, her fear transforming into something else. She stood frozen, staring at him as if he was the devil himself. Maybe, in that moment, he was.

Then, without a word, she spun on her heel and fled into the night, leaving nothing but a wool blanket at his feet and the lingering scent of canary blossoms in the air.

How could she have been so stupid? Kallessa’s heart hammered against her ribs as she fled up the inn’s stairs, bursting into their room. Hay stems stabbed her feet through her slippers, each prick a reminder of her idiocy. She halted, gasping, ears ringing as fear and excitement warred within her. But it was quickly replaced by overwhelming embarrassment.

In the dim room, she rebuilt the fire with trembling hands.

Her reflection wavered in the small mirror above the washstand—dark eyes wide in a dust-streaked, pale face, hay poking out of unruly curls. This

wild creature looked nothing like the refined image Dovina strove for her to maintain.

She yanked off the gown, her chemise clinging to overheated skin. How would she explain this to Dovina?

No.

She wouldn't breathe a word of what had just happened. She hardly believed it herself.

Kallessa inspected her once-fine blue silk slippers. Mud clung to the soft bottoms, snags marring the fabric where sticks and hay had attacked mercilessly. She tried wiping them clean, but it was useless. Fine slippers were a waste on her, anyway. At home with Aunt Gevene, she wore soft leather boots that just needed a brush to look good again. All this finery Dovina had thrust upon her was a perfect example of why she no longer belonged to society. The gowns were constricting, the hairstyles hurt her head, and the shoes were completely impractical.

Dovina would argue that *ladies* didn't need to be practical, they only needed to be pretty to catch a future husband's eye. That was the extent of her seventeen-year-old cousin's wisdom.

Kallessa wrapped the ruined slippers in a scarf, stuffing them deep into her travel bag. Dovina had also provided her with another pair in a delicate shade of pink. She'd have to resign herself to wearing those in her cousin's presence from now on.

As she brushed her hair, releasing fluttering bits of straw, a shiver coursed through her body. What had she been thinking, going out like that in the middle of the night?

She could have been hurt. The man's eyes were dark and wild, lurking with untapped violence. He'd seemed to be in a distant place, a distant time, as he pinned her down. The memory of his rough, warm hands tightly gripping her still lingered, leaving her skin feeling chafed.

The room was silent except for the sound of her bare footsteps as she approached the large copper tub, the water inside now icy cold. This was going to be awful, but only a bath would rid her of the clinging dust and itchy straw.

As she slipped off her last layer of clothing, she cautiously stepped into the frigid water, gasping as the icy chill raced across her skin. She vigorously scrubbed, the scent of soap mingling with the haunting

memories of calloused hands and whispered words. Every scrub, every wince at the cold was punishment for her idiotic errand.

A soldier. That’s what he'd been. She'd seen them come back to Teansong in the past year. Boys that left with valiance in their hearts and returned jaded and hard.

Her shudder had nothing to do with the freezing water. The faster they left this place, the better. Thank goodness she'd probably never see him again.

The soft woolen blanket, now disheveled and dotted with bits of straw, lay in a crumpled heap at Nevander’s stocking feet. The woman had brought him a blanket.

And what had he done? He’d lashed out, seizing her as if under siege, his nightmare-fueled hands acting before his mind could catch up. Self-disgust twisted in his gut.

The dark landscape of violence intertwined with the calm night of reality, and he struggled to shake it off. As he gazed out, he could almost feel the weight of the battlefield pressing upon him, its grip unyielding. Even a year away from it hadn’t been enough to free him from its clutches.

At least the night terrors had subsided after he stopped drinking into the night with his older brother, Tarrick. Imbibing might work for his brother, but it only exacerbated the shadows that clung to Nevander’s soul, making life an even bleaker existence. It had been six months since he’d come to his senses and stopped trying to drown his sorrows in the bottom of a bottle, yet the emptiness remained. What was left for him now? A gray existence of duty and desperation, devoid of the vibrant hues that once painted his world.

Three months ago, he’d received a commission to draw the new maps of the northern territories. After the war, the Birazahian empire had broken apart, forming new kingdoms. Yet the commission still sat on his desk, gathering dust beneath the weight of his procrastination. Every time he looked at it, dread overwhelmed him as the memories of that cursed conflict flooded back in vivid detail.

Crisp air whistled through the stable door, and Sunu whinnied. He stroked her head and tried to calm himself.

The faintest scent of citrus and vanilla canary blossom tickled his nose, transporting him back to the softness of the woman in his arms. She aroused feelings in him he didn't want to feel, desire and a craving for what, he didn't know. Something clean and pure.

He scoffed. That wasn't how she viewed him. Without a doubt, she thought him the worst kind of scoundrel.

Why couldn't he have been awake when she'd come? He could have thanked her, coaxed a smile from those full lips. At the very least, he could have learned her name. Now all he had was an enticing scent, and a look dark enough to cast a shadow on the sun.

Morning arrived reluctantly, lavender clouds scuttling across the sky. Nevander hadn't slept a wink, his thoughts circling like vultures. With each pass, shame burned hotter beneath his skin, warring with the memory of her softness. He groaned as he rose from his bed of hay, back aching and arms itching, and saddled Sunu.

The aroma of baking bread and clatter of pans drifted from the inn's kitchen. His stomach growled in protest, but he ignored it. If he hadn't acted like such a brute, he could have shown his face at breakfast, maybe even introduced himself properly. Instead, he was slinking away like a thief.

He gritted his teeth. Fine way to start the day.

As he led Sunu out into the courtyard, Akeela appeared from atop a hay bale, leaping down with feline grace to rub against his leg.

"Decided to show up, did you?" he murmured.

Akeela simply purred in response before sauntering off toward a patch of clover.

The inn's bizarre owl theme struck him anew as he entered. If he hadn't needed supplies, he would've avoided it altogether. He thrust the list at the owner, impatience thrumming through his veins as the man gathered the items.

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

The innkeeper's gaze skittered away from Nevander's. It wasn't this poor sod's fault that a woman had once again gotten the upper hand. If there was still dust on his cloak and his boots were ruined, well, it wasn't his fault.

"Do you have any sugared ginger?"

Five

KALLESSA AWOKE, BLEARY-EYED AND exhausted. After she'd crawled into the tub of icy water to rinse off and stood shivering in front of the small fire she'd built, she'd hoped sleep would finally come. But every time she started to doze, the memories of rough hands on her waist and the harsh whisper in her ear jolted her awake with skin prickling awareness.

Dovina had draped a shawl over a stuffed owl on the wall in their room, and she refused to remove it until the last moment.

"I'm not having that horrid creature stare at me as I dress," Dovina quipped as she twisted her hair, placing pins in her curls.

Kallessa bit back a sigh. "It's dead."

"I don't care. Those eyes will follow me around the room if I do. What possesses a man to collect such things?"

"Perhaps he's lonely," Kallessa murmured, shoving the last of Dovina's belongings into her travel bag.

Dovina scoffed, her reflection in the mirror catching the morning glow. "How can he be lonely? He runs an inn. He's surrounded by people every day."

A lump formed in Kallessa's throat. "Sometimes that's the loneliest time of all." Kallessa felt that way every time she went to Teansong square, where she used to be welcomed, where shop owners used to call to her, inquiring about her father. Now, she could be in a crowd of strangers and feel completely alone.

Dovina interrupted her thoughts as she turned around, finally finished with her hair.

"That's ridiculous. Lace up my dress and let's leave this place."

Outside, the horses' soft breaths steamed in the crisp morning air. Kallessa helped the coachman load their belongings, her eyes darting nervously to the stable. But it was empty.

As she opened the carriage door, a small package on the tufted seat caught her eye. Wrapped in linen and tied with hemp string, an intriguing spicy aroma wafted from it. She slipped out a note from beneath the bow.

Please accept my deepest apologies. Eat this when your stomach bothers you.

Sincerely,

N

Her heart raced as she untied the string, revealing translucent golden slices of what she guessed was ginger root. She'd heard of such a thing but never seen it. Crystallized sugar delicately coated each slice. She touched one to her tongue, a peppery zing followed by a burst of sweetness.

"Are we ready?" Dovina's voice shattered the moment.

Kallessa hastily slipped the package and note into her pocket. "Um, yes. Let's leave."

As they settled into the carriage, her mind whirled. N. Couldn't he at least give a full name? But what did it matter? This was likely the last she'd ever hear from the mysterious stranger.

So why did that thought bring a small, unwelcome pang to her chest?

Nevander crested the last hill, squinting against the midday sun. Finally, Ravenbluff Estate sprawled before him. After two sleepless nights, his head buzzed with fatigue. But tonight, he'd sleep in a bed that wouldn't be snatched from him, or filled with rough straw.

The previous night's rest at a small wayside inn had been a disaster. Suspicious border sentries had put the innkeeper on edge, relegating Nevander to the worst room available. Akeela had shared his misery,

crawling over his face just as he dozed off. He'd woken up coughing, mouth full of fur. Even she had despised the bed.

Thankfully, Sunu had healed from her injury, so they'd set a brisk pace, the dense forest giving way to rolling green hills where sheep grazed peacefully. In the distance, the sprawling Ravenbluff vineyards stretched for leagues to the west.

A bittersweet ache settled in Nevander's chest. This place had once been his second home. He and Castien had explored these hills extensively, mapping escape routes, dreaming of sailing the oceans and exploring the world. They'd sworn to be free.

Now look at them. Nevander, weighed down by the burdens of war; Castien, heir to the throne of Krithadea. Freedoms snatched away by duty. The taste of salty ocean air, the thrill of uncharted lands, the bond of brotherhood—gone.

As he entered the estate grounds, a flurry of activity swarmed around him. Servants bustled about, carrying massive flower arrangements and platters of food. Of course, Castien's mother, Queen Lyra, had a magical way of keeping those around her on their toes, especially as the festival approached.

He led Sunu to the stables, leaving Akeela to explore. The stable hand took charge of Sunu, leaving Nevander to enter unannounced, just as he preferred.

The grand halls of Ravenbluff estate never failed to fascinate him. Queen Lyra had transformed the once crumbling estate into a vibrant and inviting space. Whitewashed walls provided a fresh backdrop for the colorful tapestries, while pedestals showcased vases filled with golden sunflowers and purple mums. It felt lived in, even if it was the home of the royal family.

A harried maid hurried by and he caught her gently. "Where is Prince Castien?" He recognized her from his previous visits. But did she recognize him?

The maid's eyes widened, but she quickly composed herself. "He is in his chambers, my lord, but he is in an odd mood. It might be best not to disturb him."

Apparently she did.

Nevander chuckled. "I'll be the judge of that."

"Yes, my lord," she curtsied before scurrying away.

He turned down the east hall, autumn sun glowing through stained glass, until he reached a large paneled door. A wave of heat accosted him as he opened it. Inside, a crackling fire blazed in the hearth near a massive bed draped with furs and blankets.

Opulent tapestries hung on walls, while indigo blue velvet curtains cascaded from floor-to-ceiling windows. Leather-bound volumes filled the towering bookshelves, and papers, parchment, and pens cluttered the ebony writing table. The room felt both lived-in and untouched, as if time had stood still during Nevander's absence.

Near the windows, a painter stood, brush poised in hand, sweat trickling down his wrinkled brow.

His subject, Prince Castien, lay beneath layers of blankets on his bed, engrossed in a book propped on his knees. A ridiculous wool flatcap adorned with guinea feathers perched atop his black hair.

"Ah, he's finally arrived," Castien drawled, his dark eyebrow raised.

Shock reverberated through Nevander, but he forced his face into a mask of indifference. Two years had passed since he'd last seen Castien, and illness had transformed him. His face was gaunt and pale, his once vibrant gray eyes held a hardness in them that hadn't been there before. Castien was only twenty-five, a year younger than Nevander, but he knew how tragedy could change a man.

"What are you doing?" Nevander asked Castien, gesturing toward the painter.

Silence fell, broken only by pages turning as Castien closed his book. He slid up in bed, taking the blankets with him, and waved at himself derisively.

"Mother insists I have my portrait painted for my future wife's chambers. I thought it only fair to provide said wife with an accurate representation of her future husband."

He must still suffer from the cold, even after two years of recovery. Nevander had received weekly reports from Shaydn, the healer he'd personally sent, about Castien's progress until she'd left. However, seeing Castien in person was a harsh reminder of the damage caused by the poisoning.

"And don't you look dashing, fair soldier." Castien's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Why don't you join me? We're the two most eligible princes in all the kingdoms. The maidens would swoon to find Prince Nevander

Lionskye of Dracia and Prince Castien Ravenbluff of Krithadea in one portrait. Imagine!" He clutched his chest dramatically.

Nevander scoffed and glanced down at his wrinkled cloak and stained breeches.

"I'm surprised they let me into the estate looking like this."

"I've known you were coming since early this morning," Castien stated flatly.

Of course he did.

"Does your mother know about your hired friends?"

Castien sipped from a mug, grimacing slightly. "My mother is too busy trying not to embarrass the family name with this crumbling estate to worry about what I do."

He turned to the painter. "You may leave, Agnew. Inform my mother that her illustrious son's portrait is almost complete."

"This is highly irregular, my lord," the painter complained as he gathered his tools.

Castien smirked. "Isn't it?"

Illness hadn't robbed him of his sharp sense of humor, at least. After the artist fled, Castien pulled off the ridiculous hat and threw back the blankets. He wore heavy woolen trousers, socks and a coat over a thick knit sweater. He replaced the flat cap with a woolen knit hat and, with a deep breath, stood to greet Nevander.

"It's good to see you, you old bastard. You look like crap, by the way."

Nevander scoffed. "So do you."

Castien quirked an eyebrow. "That may be true, but at least I don't smell like it. Have you been sleeping with the sheep?"

Frustration and exhaustion crept into Nevander's voice. "I was swindled out of my room by a girl, and then treated like a criminal by your Krithadean innkeeper at the border."

Castien erupted into laughter, doubling over. Gasping for breath, he managed, "Go take a bath, you dirtbag. Then we have some catching up to do."

Jagged cliffs towered above Kallessa, daunting against the brilliant blue sky. A sheer drop-off plummeted to a rocky ravine a hundred feet below. Kallessa's heart hammered as she gripped the sides of the carriage, her knuckles turning white. The road ahead narrowed, the sharp hairpin turn looming in front of them. Her breath caught in her throat. The carriage had no top, only slick leather seats stained with glistening blood. The wild-eyed horses thundered on, pulling the carriage faster and faster. In a sudden moment of terror, Kallessa found herself holding the reins, the weight of her family's lives in her shaking hands.

"No! Stop! Stop!" she screamed, the wind ripping the words from her mouth. But they only drove faster. Mother and Father sat across from her, their faces twisted with manic joy as they raised their hands in the air. Their skin peeled away like rotting fruit, revealing grinning skeletons adorned in fine clothing. Blain's mouth stretched impossibly wide, emitting a piercing string of notes. She screamed and screamed as they hurtled over the edge and into the abyss below.

"Kallessa, wake up!"

She jolted awake, Dovina shaking her arm. Her heart thundered in her ears as the horrors of her dream overlay the present. Swallowing against her parched throat, Kallessa forced herself upright, trying to shake off the residual unease. She hadn't had that dream in months.

Dovina sat across from her, cradling her travel harp, her eyebrows furrowed.

"You were screaming like a steam whistle. I couldn't even hear myself play. I need to practice."

Kallessa's cheeks burned. It had been a rough two days since the incident at the inn. They'd stayed in two more unremarkable inns, thankfully avoiding the soldier. The ginger he'd given her had helped with the nausea, but nothing could ease the anxiety of riding in the carriage.

As they approached their journey's final leg, Kallessa retreated into silence while Dovina's chatter filled the carriage. She'd never known her cousin to talk so much. Her demeanor had changed to almost childlike excitement as she animatedly talked about the prince.

"I heard rumors that Prince Castien is throwing this grand festival to find a wife." Dovina giggled. "Can you imagine being a princess? No, well, of course you can't, poor thing. But I can." Dovina held her chin high and

gave a mock wave to an imaginary crowd. “Princess Dovina. It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

Kallessa bit her lip, stifling the urge to roll her eyes. If being insufferable and entitled were prerequisites, Dovina would make a perfect princess.

“Ever since his older brother, Prince Dane, died, there’s been mystery surrounding the family,” Dovina explained, her voice tinged with intrigue. “Supposedly he was thrown from his horse, but there was no state funeral and no one ever saw the body.” She yanked the curtains open beside her, letting in shafts of dappled daylight.

Unwilling curiosity got the best of Kallessa. “How do you know this?”

“Well, I live in society, unlike you. I try to keep up with what’s going on.” Dovina’s eyes sparkled. “Oh my goodness, I’m so excited!”

Kallessa was developing a pain in her stomach that no amount of ginger would fix. Five years had passed since she’d been out in society. Of course, she still remembered how to act, but the idea of all those people made her palms sweat. Hopefully, the estate would have places she could tuck herself away, like a library. She could almost smell the scent of old books and cozy wingback chairs.

Yes, that would work. She’d make an appointment with the prince, then hide away until it was all over.

“I responded to the invite immediately, so we should have choice rooms,” Dovina said. “And since father is an upstanding member of society, we should have no problems.” She paused, tapping her chin. “Perhaps you should go by an alias. I don’t want to be associated with tragedy, just in case anyone has ever heard of you.”

Kallessa’s chest tightened, the dream still raw. “I’m sure no one has heard of the tragedy in this kingdom. We’re a long way from home, but I’ve already been using Mother’s last name occasionally. I guess it will do.”

Dovina plucked a few harp strings, the sound bouncing around the small compartment. “Perfect. No one will even know we’re related.” A mischievous smile played on her lips. “Would you like to hear the song I wrote for the prince?”

Six

AFTER A MUCH NEEDED bath, Nevander found Castien in the estate's heated sunroom, watering a flat of small red flowers. A slight haze hung in the air, thick with humidity and a strange scent. He'd never actually been in here. When they were younger, King Graynor kept the doors locked for fear that they'd break the glass windows. They probably would have.

Enormous panes ran from floor to ceiling, framed in gleaming bronze. Shelving ran along the back walls, holding various flats, watering cans and other implements. A sitting area nestled in one corner, while a large brazier flanked by two club chairs took up the other corner.

Castien didn't turn as Nevander entered.

"Since when did you take up horticulture?" Nevander asked.

Castien cut a few blossoms, letting them drop into a porcelain bowl. "Do you know what these flowers are?"

Nevander drew closer. The blossoms were not only red, but turned orange and gold toward the tips of the broad, flat petals.

Nevander raised an eyebrow. "Is this a trick question?"

Castien continued, ignoring Nevander. "They are steaming rotten torture devices that taste like musty dragon remains."

Nevander's brow furrowed as Castien took the blossoms to a brazier in the corner and dumped them in a small pot of boiling water. A pungent odor wafted up, stinging Nevander's nostrils, and he stepped back.

Castien smiled at him, the expression cold and devoid of humor. "I used to try to mask the taste with sugar, or lemon, or spirits, but nothing helps."

“Why would you drink such vile stuff, then?” Nevander asked.

“Because fireflowers are the only thing that keep me from freezing to death.”

Nevander shuddered inwardly. Even now, Castien suffered from the aftereffects of the Va’Tar mushroom. Shaydn had tried to explain it in her letters, but seeing it was different. The Va’Tar mushroom was so rare that only those from the frigid northern regions even knew of its existence. It only grew deep inside certain arctic caves, and its poison was usually absolute. But Castien had survived. Unlike Dane.

The poisoning wasn’t common knowledge—only Shaydn had told Nevander about it. Yet even she lacked the full details. She only knew the wine had been tainted. Dane gulped the entire glass, while Castien only sipped before sensing something awry.

As a result, Dane died, leaving Castien to struggle with not only his brother’s death, but the looming crown.

Castien removed the pot and poured the contents through a sieve into an earthenware mug, steam rising in wisps. It had barely stopped boiling when he took a large drink from it, his face contorting in a grimace. But as he consumed the foul drink, color returned to his cheeks and a brightness to his eyes.

“Care for a sip?” Castien offered, holding out the mug with its last remnants clinging to the bottom.

Nevander cautiously took it, bringing it to his lips. Acrid fumes accosted his nose and his lips started burning as if he’d rubbed them with an ember from the brazier. He jerked the cup away.

“Just one small delight in my exciting day as heir to the throne,” Castien said, bitterness laced through his voice.

Before Nevander could respond, Castien changed the subject. “How is the royal family of Dracia, anyway?”

How were they? Driving Nevander crazy. Coming home from the chaos of war, he was greeted with the news that his sister, Ciana, was already a widow and now had to raise her daughter alone. The energy of the Lionskye household engulfed him once again, the echoes of their shouts resonating throughout the house. He could hardly stand it. Their questions, their relentless pushing for him to be who he was before, the laughing. The laughing. The blood on his hands hadn’t even dried, and his family wanted

the old Nevander back. Honestly, if Castien's letter hadn't arrived, asking for his help, he wasn't sure what he would have done.

"Their usual loud annoying selves. Wynna misses you." Nevander's sister, Ciana, had been Dane's wife. She'd returned home after his death. Wynna, her daughter, was barely the age of six when her father met his untimely demise.

Castien's gray eyes softened at the mention of their shared niece, but he said nothing.

"Father is building a new shipyard to take advantage of the trade with the new territories." Nevander continued. The brutal Zhakrova dynasty that had once held tyrannical control over the vast northern Birazahian Empire was no more, their reign of oppression finally ended. But the cost had been immeasurably high.

Nevander had seen the devastation firsthand during the war, the civil unrest, the citizens that suffered under that cruel regime. When the Zhakrova's made the fateful decision to invade Dracia, stretching their armies and resources to the breaking point, it proved to be their ultimate undoing. The once mighty empire now lay broken into disparate kingdoms, each vying for their own independence with newly installed sovereigns.

"Well, they've kept busy." Castien's voice had an air of dismissal as he set down his mug. "Let's get out of this room. It stinks."

Nevander was more than happy to escape the stuffy, smelly room. As they left, Castien hung his coat on a stand. Nevander's breath caught in his throat. He was so thin. Nothing like the Castien he'd known two years ago, the one who rode a horse like a champion, who wielded a sword like it was made of air.

Queen Lyra, her silvery blond hair trailing behind her, rushed up the hall. She stopped in her tracks as she spotted them, her violet silk gown rustling. "Castien, I just heard from the painter that-" She broke off, her eyes falling on Nevander.

"Van, dear, is that you?" The intensity of her gaze made it clear that she recognized him.

Just when Nevander had hoped he could go unnoticed.

Nevander bowed slightly. "My lady."

Her eyes held a layer of emotion she didn't voice. "Well, why are you still standing there? Give me a hug. Why do you look as if you just escaped prison?" The sound of her voice was stern, yet filled with warmth.

Leave it to Queen Lyra to never mince words.

Nevander gently hugged her slender waist and stepped back.

“It’s good to see you, too.” He smiled.

Her stern expression held as she turned back to her son. “Why is the painter quitting?”

Castien’s face was devoid of any emotion as he responded. “I have no idea, Mother. Everything seemed to be going so well.”

Lyra’s gaze darted about. “I don’t have time to deal with this now. We’ll look into it after the festival is over. Have you seen Celine?”

“No, Mother. The chef is probably browbeating her staff into submission, as usual, in the kitchen.”

“I need to finalize the menus.” She looked back at Nevander, her eyes softening. “Welcome back Van, it’s good to see you.”

“You as well, my lady.” The warmth in her voice made him feel a twinge of homesickness he hadn’t expected.

She hurried off, the sound of her footsteps echoing in the hallway, calling back to them, “Castien dear, are you sure you don’t mind checking the seating charts for tomorrow’s dinner?” The scent of lavender perfume lingered in the air as she spoke.

“Not at all, Mother,” Castien said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Make sure the guest list is updated and give Nevander a copy of the schedule of events,” she called, before she turned the corner and out of sight.

“Yes, Mother,” Castien responded in a syrupy voice too quietly for her to hear.

“That won’t be necessary,” said Nevander as he fell in step with Castien.

Castien paused, fixing him with an intense gaze. “Would you leave your friend that you haven’t seen in two years, who might be dying, I might add, to face these two weeks alone?”

Nevander let out a frustrated sigh. “I came to help you, not to join in with these ridiculous games and parties. You know I hate society.” The thought of mingling with the elite and their false pleasantries made his skin crawl.

Castien’s expression remained impassive, not a trace of sympathy in his pale gray eyes. “As do I, but do you see me shirking my duties?”

Nevander squinted at Castien. “You love parties. And I thought your letter stated you wanted my help.”

“I love people watching. There’s a difference,” Castien countered smoothly. “And I do want your help. What better way to search for potential suspects than to be among all the guests?”

A shiver ran down Nevander’s spine at the thought of the crowded rooms and buzzing conversations. There would be close to two hundred people in attendance. Some coming in for the day from closer by, and others staying on the sprawling estate. People, people, people. As they walked down the hall, the air grew thick with the scent of freshly cut flowers, mingling with the aroma of rich, decadent food from the kitchens.

“No.”

Castien’s eyes narrowed. “Do you know how many guests know that Prince Nevander, the war hero, will be in attendance?”

Is that what they thought? That he was a hero? All he could see were the blank eyes of his dead soldiers staring back at him, accusing.

“You told me I could remain unknown,” Nevander stated flatly.

“Yes, I did. But only if you participate. Otherwise, I will make an announcement at the first dinner of our illustrious guest.” His words hung in the air like a heavy fog.

Nevander’s heart sank. “Why are you doing this to me?”

Castien raked his fingers through his black hair, the first crack in his composure. “To you? What about me? Mother is trying to auction me off like a prize pony.”

“Is she really expecting that you will find a bride?” Nevander asked.

Castien shook his head in frustration. “It’s ridiculous. Her desperation is embarrassing.”

“What does King Graynor say about it?”

“Since when have you ever seen my father defy my mother? He’s still mourning Dane and won’t even come to the festival,” Castien revealed, a quick flash of pain in his eyes, swiftly disguised. “He’s found some excuse to stay in the capital. So I’m here at my mother’s mercy, and you want to hide in your rooms for a fortnight?” Castien shook his head. “I’m sorry, my friend, but it’s not going to happen.”

All of those peaceful moments Nevander thought he could have, the ones in the massive library here on the estate, or the quiet walks in the hidden gardens, or even the days of not getting out of bed, were shattered.

“So nice to be back,” Nevander mumbled sarcastically.

“Indeed,” Castien said. “So, who do you want to be for the next two weeks?”

Ravenbluff Estate emerged on the horizon as the carriage crested the final hill, its rose-colored stone walls stretching endlessly under the late afternoon sun. Kallessa’s breath caught in her throat.

Vibrant formal gardens decorated the front lawns, their colors dancing in the breeze. Intricate iron lanterns swayed gently, casting a warm glow across the drive flanked by massive oaks whose leaves glowed bronze against the azure sky. Someone had magically created an atmosphere of grandeur and intimacy existing side by side.

As they pulled up, stiff butlers dressed in black and white emerged to escort them down.

Dovina’s delighted smile hadn’t faltered since they’d first glimpsed the estate. “It’s just how I imagined it,” she gushed.

Kallessa’s stomach knotted. It was breathtaking, and startling in its obvious wealth. A stark contrast to Aunt Gevene's cottage.

The manservants led them up the twisting stone walkway to the massive paneled front doors.

In contrast to the formal staff, urns of cheerful orange mums and ivy framed the steps. At the entrance, a butler scanned a parchment.

“Names, please?” he asked, his accent sharp and precise.

“Dovina Wynlar, and my companion, Kallessa Dahoko,” Dovina announced.

The man marked his chart and motioned to a nearby maid. “Ms. Pellion will show you to your rooms.”

Kallessa’s eyes widened as they entered. The foyer’s ceiling soared at least thirty feet high, stained glass windows casting a kaleidoscope across polished checkered marble. Tapestries of vast landscapes adorned whitewashed walls. The air smelled clean and citrusy, with a hint of floral that made her nose twitch.

Twin ebony staircases circled grandly up to the second floor. As they climbed the left one, plush burgundy carpet engulfed Kallessa’s slippers.

The hallway seemed endless, illuminated by circular skylights that softened the surrounding stone.

Ms. Pellion opened a two paneled door and ushered them in.

“This will be your room during your time here. The schedule of events and a map of the estate are on the entry table. Enjoy your stay.” Then the maid disappeared, leaving them to explore.

Their suite was light and airy, with watercolor florals on soft yellow walls and gauzy curtains billowing in the breeze. Kallessa could spend two weeks here, easily. She imagined curling up with a book by the window or drifting off in the luxurious bed.

Dovina raced around, giggling. “This is amazing, cousin! Even better than Wynlar estate, isn’t it?”

A lump formed in Kallessa’s throat. No, she wouldn’t trade a thousand Ravenbluff estates for her childhood home. Her mother would have laughed at all the grandness. *All I need is a roof to keep me dry and your father to keep me warm. And horses,* she’d say, hugging Kallessa’s father, gazing at him as if he’d hung the moon. Kallessa sighed. To have a love like that.

“There’s to be a masquerade ball!” Dovina exclaimed, brandishing the schedule.

“We didn’t bring costumes.”

“It says they will provide the costumes.” Dovina twirled. “This will be the best two weeks of my life.”

Kallessa’s stomach churned. While Dovina danced and dined, she’d have to find a way to see the prince. If she couldn’t interest him in her ideas, why was she even here? Besides Uncle Talos’s threats of destitution, of course. She grimaced at the thought of so many dinners and events, so many people.

The estate map on the mahogany table caught her eye. It was no standard map, but a masterful, magical illustration. As she held it, she could almost hear birds chirping and bunnies rustling as she spotted their delicate drawings among the trees and gardens. It was obviously an artistic rendering of Ravenbluff, as there was no way the entire estate could possibly fit on the paper. But it was so enchanting, she didn’t care.

Unfolding it three times, she discovered a small legend tucked away in the bottom left corner. She couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to be discovered.

Kallessa pushed the thought away. She wasn't here to explore; she was here to secure her and Aunt Gevene's future. With her 23rd birthday looming, Uncle Talos would expect her to be married soon. Desperation washed over her. This might be her last chance at independence.

"Do you know what time it is?" Dovina asked, her nose still buried in the schedule.

Kallessa pulled back the gauzy curtains. The setting sun bathed the vast vineyard and formal gardens in a golden glow, a tapestry of carefully arranged wealth that seemed to mock her. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass. "Around 5 o'clock, I'd guess," she replied, her voice hollow.

Dovina's urgency shattered the moment. "We only have two hours before the events begin! Where's our luggage? Do we even have a maid?" She yanked the door open.

Irritation flared in Kallessa's chest. "How would I know? We arrived here together, remember?"

Dovina rolled her eyes. "Go find out about our luggage. And a maid. I need someone to do my hair for dinner. I love you, cousin, but your hair styling skills need work."

Kallessa wanted to yell, *that's because I'm not a maid!* But she held her tongue. For the sake of peace during their two-week stay, she'd have to keep her frustrations in check. But as she left the room, her fists clenched at her sides, she wondered how long she could maintain the façade.

Seven

TWO HOURS LATER, DOVINA flounced out of the room, her hair perfectly coifed and her delicate pink gown cinched to perfection. “I’m not waiting for you,” she declared. “I hope you didn’t think we’d be spending all our time together while we’re here.”

Kallessa flicked her eyes skyward and huffed in relief as the door clicked shut. Thank goodness for that.

She turned toward the window, inhaling the clean evening air. Russet and violet painted the sky as the scent of fresh-cut grass and mums wafted through the opening. She tried to focus on the chirping crickets, her breathing, anything but the night’s events.

Her stomach twisted as conversations and laughter seeped through the door. She checked her image in the full-length mirror beside the wardrobe. The maid had really outdone herself. An elegantly attired young woman in dark blue, with flattering ringlets framing her face, stared back. Wow. If only she could make her unruly hair do this at home. Biting her lip, she forced her feet to the door.

Kallessa grasped the cool brass doorknob with a sweaty palm and forced her breathing to settle. She could change her life this week if she could just summon the courage—and not embarrass herself in the process.

The grand dining hall assaulted her senses. Over a hundred brightly dressed lords and ladies chattered too loudly, clinked their forks too forcefully, chewed too enthusiastically. Flickering candlelight danced across

faces, disorienting her. The mingling aromas of sweet, salty, and sour dishes made her head spin.

Thick marble columns lined the hall, their capitals carved with twining grape vines and unfurling leaves. Between them, tapestries in rich burgundy and navy depicted scenes from Krithadean history, their threads catching the candlelight like liquid gold.

The endless dining tables gleamed with pristine white linens and elaborate centerpieces of fall flowers mixed with wheat stalks and dragon-shaped candelabras. Silver, gold, and crystal sparkled everywhere. Even the chairs were works of art, carved from dark wood and cushioned in deep blue velvet that matched the royal colors.

Tall windows stretched from floor to ceiling along one wall, though their views of the garden were now hidden behind heavy brocade curtains. Servants in black and white livery moved silently between the tables like shadows, appearing and disappearing through discrete doorways set into the paneled walls.

Everything spoke of old money and power, from the polished marble floors to the ornate moldings, and she'd never felt more out of place.

Kallessa dodged the man's elbow yet again as he waved his fork in time to the animated story he recounted to the lady seated across from him. The first time it happened, she had her head turned, politely listening to the older lady sitting to her right. Her cheek still stung from the accidental blow.

"So terribly sorry, miss." The young man had mumbled before diving back into his tale, his tailored green sleeve waving once again. She'd rubbed her face, thinking it was just a single mistake, until it happened again.

Now, she leaned back, teetering on the edge of her chair.

She'd lost her appetite, anyway. The food, though exquisite, was far richer than what she was used to. And who could eat seven courses? Even at her father's dinner parties, the meals were simple, like roasted chicken and cheese dumplings or mashed rutabagas with savory gravy. Desserts of custard pies from the market or fresh apple tarts from the kitchen. But this dining experience transcended her wildest imagination.

The parade of elaborate dishes blurred together. Clear soup with mysterious golden cubes. Vibrant red beets on peppery arugula. Five more

courses she couldn't name. Finally, a decadent chocolate-dipped biscuit arrived, dusted with what looked like gold.

Before Kallessa could taste it, the clink of silverware on crystal reverberated through the room, piercing the chatter and bringing about a sudden silence.

On a raised platform, at the head of the table, sat a slender young man in regal blue attire, his wavy dark hair touching his collar. Even from across the room, his cool gray eyes assessed the party.

"Welcome, everyone, to the Axan Moon Festival." His voice resonated with authority, capturing the room's focus. "We are delighted to once again commemorate Axan, dragon of harvest. This feast symbolizes our gratitude for another abundant year."

As he continued his speech about dragons, harvests, and traditions, Kallessa's gaze drifted around the hall before returning to the speaker. The young man's words rang hollow, as if he didn't believe them himself. He studied the crowd with a distant look, simply going through the motions. As he concluded his speech with thanks to the laborers for their hard work, he took his seat, his eyes fluttering before he sipped a glass of water.

Kallessa startled as the attendees erupted into applause before their voices rose in a swell of chatter as they returned to their plates. Had any of these nobles ever lifted a finger to do any actual work in their lives? How many of them had ever toiled in the fields or mended their own clothes? Kallessa could guess a grand total of none.

"Can you believe that's Prince Castien?" The man across from her whispered to his companion.

"I know." The lady replied behind her hand. "Maybe the rumors are true."

"He looks nothing like the prince we saw two years ago."

Kallessa tuned them out. She hated gossip. If there were any conclusions to draw about the situation, she'd make them herself.

She risked another glance toward the platform. The prince sat next to a beautiful older woman with silver-blond hair swept into a crown, his expression softening as he chatted with her. His slender frame and pallid complexion made him less intimidating than she'd imagined. Had he been ill?

His pale gray eyes swept the room, meeting hers for a fleeting instant. They lingered, assessing her, and she forced her gaze down. No, his

apparent illness had no effect on his authority. Those shrewd eyes could impale a person. How was she going to get an audience with him?

She picked up the chocolate biscuit, gold flakes sprinkling back onto the small porcelain plate.

“The name is Warwick,” a voice interrupted her thoughts. A bolt of panic shot through Kallessa. It was the man seated to her left. Elbow man. Had he grown tired of his previous conversation? Sure enough, he’d fixed his gaze directly upon her. The biscuit froze in her hand, halfway to her lips.

He wasn’t really a bad looking man. His eyes were a pleasant shade of blue, and his cheeks were rosy with drink. His disheveled blond hair added a casual charm to his appearance. He wore an emerald suit that fit his trim figure, with a paisley cravat tied about his crisp white shirt. To Kallessa’s eyes, it was rather garish, but what did she know of Krithadean fashion? He could be at the forefront for all she knew. However, the memory of his intrusive elbows jolted her back to reality.

“Um, hello,” she stammered, meeting his expectant gaze.

“And your name is?” He raised a groomed eyebrow.

“Kallessa,” she replied, her voice strained.

He leaned closer, narrowing the careful space she’d crafted between them. The spicy scent of his cologne stung her nose. “Kallessa, it cannot be mere coincidence that fate has placed us side by side on this serendipitous night.”

Kallessa’s mind raced, searching for any polite response, but the man’s next words held her captive in mortifying anticipation.

“My wife, may she rest in peace, drowned a year ago on this very night,” he proclaimed. “And thus, I’m officially out of mourning as of today.”

She stared at him in stunned silence, mouth parting. What could she say to that? Should she congratulate him? Offer him sympathy?

Her attempt to murmur condolences was swept away by his relentless tide. “And now,” he forged ahead, eyes glinting, “I’m in search of a fresh start... with a new wife.”

The biscuit clattered to the plate, dropped from her limp fingers.

“Sir, I—”

Warwick reached across the space between them, his hand hovering dangerously close to hers. “Dearest Kallessa, your name flows like a gentle stream off the tongue. It suits you.”

She drew back, sliding her hand out of reach. He'd drawn out the 's', hissing like a snake, and leaned forward.

"A life of solitude can be a dreadful thing, don't you think?" he murmured, inches from her ear. "A widower like myself deserves companionship... and you, a lady of such grace, ought to be cherished."

A trickle of sweat crept down her spine. "I am not—"

"No need for modesty, my dear. I've ample wealth to provide. And I assure you, my marital past is unblemished by any foul deeds. The authorities were quite thorough."

Her jaw dropped as she stared into his bloodshot eyes. No, no, no. Was this really how the festival was going to be? Fending off strange men who may or may not have drowned their wives?

She placed a hand on her midriff. "Oh, I'm so sorry. It must have been the beef. Please excuse me." She swiveled, the scrape of her chair distant to her ears, and caught a glimpse of his grin, like a cat that had cornered a mouse.

"Understandable." Warwick eyed her retreat. "Take all the time you need, my dear. The festival days are long, and so are the nights."

Barely registering the servant pulling out her chair, Kallessa plunged into the halls of Ravenbluff Estate, having no idea where she was going, but knowing she couldn't stay there.

Nevander's eyes widened. Not three seats away sat that annoying blond-haired woman who'd swindled him out of his room at the inn. Her slim gloved hands rested in her lap, a picture of demure grace. Beside her sat Lord Valen, an old windbag whose ramblings filled the air over the background noise of conversation and clinking silverware. Her delicate laughter and subtle nods perfectly synchronized with the elderly lord's monotonous tale, one that Nevander had endured countless times at similar events.

Gone was the wild-eyed banshee from the inn. In her place sat a serene, composed lady. Soft curls framed her face, and her pink gown shimmered in the chandeliers' glow. Cream lace adorned the edges, matching her gloves perfectly.

The young Lady Wynlar glanced his way, as if sensing his scrutiny. Nevander flashed his most courtly smile, eyes twinkling. Her cornflower blues widened slightly before she returned a sweet smile and turned back to Lord Valen.

Just as he suspected, not a spark of recognition. Nevander suppressed a chuckle. To her, he'd been nothing more than a ragged vagabond, an outsider unworthy of such grand affairs. Society was indeed fickle. All he had to do was grow a beard and act unassuming, and his own citizens didn't even recognize him. Not that he minded. Two years had passed since he'd last attended court, and he didn't miss the fanfare one bit.

A new thought struck him. If Lady Wynlar was here, then her enigmatic companion must be too. That warm, radiant woman he'd held for a fleeting moment two nights ago. The woman whose name he still didn't know. Try as he might, she'd lingered in his thoughts. Would she even want to see him again? At the very least, he owed her a genuine apology.

Nevander leaned forward, peering beyond the towering platters and floral arrangements. A sea of faces filled his view, but he was looking for that curly dark hair and golden skin.

The clink of silverware against glass pulled his attention. Castien took his place at the raised table, preparing to deliver his welcome speech. Queen Lyra gazed at her son, pride and sorrow mingling in her eyes.

Castien had never shared the harrowing tale of their poisoning with Nevander. But Nevander knew better than to pry. Castien would open up in his own time. Still, he looked so thin, as if more than illness was eating away at him.

As Castien concluded, Nevander's gaze drifted back to the west side of the hall. A petite figure abruptly rose from her chair. It was her. Though her expression was indiscernible from this distance, he recognized her dining companion - Warwick Ratliff, Krithadean dignitary and all-around creep.

Nevander's pulse quickened. Excusing himself politely from the table, he glanced at Castien, who raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Later," Nevander mouthed silently.

Then he rushed from the hall, following her navy blue gown as it disappeared around a corner.

Kallessa's heart raced at the faint echo of footsteps behind her. Was that odious man following her? Panic surged through her veins as she turned a corner, entering a dimly lit hallway lined with rows of intricately carved wooden doors. This place was a labyrinth, and she didn't have time to study the map hidden in her small handbag.

She grasped the doorknob of the first door on her left.

Locked.

She flicked her gaze back, but the hall's shadows were too deep to see very far. Rushing to the door on her right, she yanked on the knob and it blessedly turned under her grip, releasing a soft creak as it swung open. She slipped inside, shutting it behind her with a delicate click.

Leaning against the door, her chest heaving, she silently pleaded, *Please let him go by. Please, please.* Had they only arrived today? Two more weeks of this and she'd either go mad, into hiding, or be engaged to marry a suspected murderer. How could it get worse?

The scent of aged leather and polished wood filled her nostrils as her gaze darted around the office, searching for a potential hiding spot.

The doorknob began to turn. Her heart leapt into her throat as she whirled around. The desk? No, she didn't have time to hide under it. The curtains! Lovely full drapes hung in the large windows that blocked the light. She slid behind the sumptuous drapes, pressing herself against the cool glass, pulse pounding in her ears. The door swung open with a faint squeak before closing. The room fell into an eerie stillness, broken only by the sound of her own racing heart.

"Are you hiding from them also?" A voice, rich and resonant, that sounded faintly familiar for some reason, filled the room.

Kallessa froze, holding her breath. That wasn't Warwick's voice. Should she respond?

No.

She wasn't saying a word. Maybe if she held still, he would lose interest and leave. *Please leave.*

“I know you’re there.” The words hung in the air, heavy with certainty, followed by light steps across the thick carpet. What now? Was she going to let herself be found cowering behind the curtains? Her cheeks burned. She looked down to see a pair of dark, glossy boots peeking out from beneath the curtains at her feet.

“These parties can be overwhelming, can’t they?” the rich voice spoke again, its timbre filled with understanding.

She remained silent.

“I’ve never had a conversation with a person hiding behind a curtain before. I find it rather refreshing, don’t you? All that mundane talk face to face, completely overrated, in my opinion.”

A giggle escaped her lips against her will.

“Ah, a lady. Well, fair lady-” He paused, interrupted by another noise emanating from the door.

The curtains beside her swished, and suddenly a tall man stood next to her, his scent carrying hints of clove and cedar. It was a clean scent she suddenly wanted to inhale. And she would have, except a large, warm hand gripped her arm in subtle warning.

Two deep voices spoke in a harsh language she didn’t understand in hushed, hurried tones. The man beside her stiffened, looking down at her. He placed a finger against his lips, silently urging her to remain quiet. She nodded, and he slowly withdrew his hand.

In the dim light, his silhouette was all she could see, yet something about him felt strangely familiar. Had she heard his voice before? His accent made her think of northern Dracia. The warmth of his body next to hers chased away any chill she felt. She should be appalled. She was hiding behind a curtain with a stranger. What if they were caught? She was uncertain of the Krithadean courting customs, but she highly doubted that clandestine meetings behind curtains were deemed acceptable.

An eternity seemed to pass before the two men finally ceased their conversation and exited the room. She heard him sigh next to her as the heavy wooden door creaked shut behind them. In the stillness that followed, she found herself holding her breath, uncertain of what would happen next. Though she knew nothing of this stranger beside her, some instinct told her not to fear him.

“My lady,” he whispered softly, “we must stop meeting like this.”

She felt a nervous laugh building in her throat again and she shoved it down.

Instead, she surprised herself by saying, “This is the most fun I’ve had all evening.” The words slipped out before she could stop them. It was true, though. Hiding here behind the curtains trying not to laugh was far more enjoyable than the tedious party with all its false smiles and inane small talk. Not to mention that horrible Warwick.

A low chuckle rumbled from him, sending delightful shivers cascading down her arms.

“Perhaps, to not start a scandal this early in the festival, I should leave the room.” He lightly touched her wrist, his fingers grazing her bare skin. “But I beg you to grace me with your name first.”

Kallessa hesitated, unsure if she should tell him. But there was something magnetic about this stranger that made her want to trust him.

“K-Kallessa, my lord.” Had she just stuttered? At least he couldn’t see her blushing here in the dark. And he likely wouldn’t recognize her later, anyway.

He raised her hand gently, his lips brushing against her skin like the softest whisper. Her breath hitched at the exquisite sensation, her eyes widening in the dim light as she tried to capture every detail of him in her memory.

“I am Nevander. And I am no lord. Just a simple man. I bid you good night, Lady Kallessa.”

His voice was like velvet as he spoke her name. The curtains swished aside as he released her hand, and the door opened and closed again before she could draw another shuddering breath.

She stood frozen for what seemed like an eternity before she finally forced her feet to move. Then she raced back to her chambers, her heart pounding like a stag being chased by a fox, the memory of his touch lingering on her skin.

Eight

CANARY BLOSSOMS AND FEMININE sweetness lingered in Nevander's nostrils as he strode toward the royal chambers. His heart raced, the treasonous conversation still echoing in his ears.

"So, the little bastard still lives, although he looks like death. Why couldn't he just die like his brother? It would have made all our lives easier."

"What about the king?"

"He's getting old. His time will come. Soon, we'll see the downfall of the whole stinking Ravenbluff family."

"Good riddance."

Nevander's fists clenched. If only he'd been alone, he would have dragged those shadows into the light. But he couldn't alarm the woman beside him. He finally had a name to go with those large golden eyes.

Kallessa.

He wanted to see her in the daylight, see the sun glinting off her sooty lashes and mahogany curls.

Her accent held the murmur of southern winds through golden fields, a melody of gentle days beside azure waves. So different from the harsh, driving snows and biting cold of the northern reaches.

Birazahia was a prime example. Before the empire fell in the war, Nevander had fought in the frigid Narian mountain range, bordering Dracia and the old empire. The people there were hardy and stout, with no time for

pleasantries. Except for Shaydn, that young healer he'd rescued. Her compassion had unknowingly shaped the future of kingdoms.

Could he ask Castien about her? Did Castien even remember the healer Nevander had sent to tend to him?

Nevander tapped on Castien's chamber door. No response. Of course, the prince wouldn't escape the opening event so easily. Thank goodness he was here under guise. Castien had laughed when Nevander told him he disguised himself as a son of a shipbuilder looking for backers.

"Isn't that what you really are?" Castien had asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Pretty much. Father is always trying to figure out ways to build more ships."

"What is his obsession with ship building, anyway?" Castien inquired.

"First, the war destroyed entire fleets, so building is always good business. Second, I've always seen that wanderlust in his eyes at the shipyard as he looks out to sea. I wouldn't be surprised if one day Mother wakes up to find a note from him tacked to the bedpost saying he's sailed off into the unknown."

"You and I had dreams like that once."

"We did, didn't we?" Nevander had agreed, lost in the memories for a moment.

Letting himself into Castien's chambers, he scanned the dimly lit room. Heavy drapes concealed the windows, blocking any errant light.

He pushed them back, swinging open the windows. The distant sounds of festivities blended with the early autumn chorus of crickets.

Castien's book on Ravenbluff's history lay on his nightstand. Its pages were dogeared with use, filled with tales of hidden passages, of wars and loves, each word laden with the dust of secrets. The bookmark betrayed the last words Castien had devoured:

Great-great grandfather Darington constructed the underground passages that span the west and south wing. Their uses were many in the last war, but were also used for such things as Grandmother Ravenbluff's lovers. After one such tryst was caught, the passageways were blocked off and have fallen into misuse. I've been in them, but they are in dire disrepair and threaten to collapse upon one's head. I endeavored to catalogue all the tunnels, but I fear I have fallen short. This land holds more mysteries than I can catalogue. If only Darington's records hadn't mysteriously disappeared.

“Read anything interesting?” Castien’s voice broke Nevander’s focus.

Nevander glanced up. “I never knew about the underground passageways. Imagine the trouble we could have gotten into.”

Castien grinned. “I know. This book was hidden on a high shelf behind the land management journals. My illness had me reading everything to ease the boredom.”

Nevander laid down the book reluctantly, even though he itched to read more. The Ravenbluff estate had always been a conundrum, old and new, state-of-the art and crumbling ruins.

Castien closed the window, shutting out the crisp night air creeping into his bedchamber. He shivered and stoked the fire back to life. His lips were tinged with blue as he tossed off his dinner attire, throwing it on the bed.

“So, I saw you leave early this evening,” Castien said, quirking an eyebrow. “Any reason?”

“Remember the blond-haired little tyrant that stole my room at the inn?” Nevander replied.

Castien lips quirked. “Yes. It seems I recall you grumbling about her.”

“Well, she’s actually here.” Nevander continued.

“I know.” Castien responded.

“Of course you do,” Nevander muttered. In Castien’s world, nothing was ever truly a secret. “Did you know she traveled with a companion?”

Castien rummaged through his wardrobe, his voice muffled as he answered. “Are you really asking me if I don’t know who is at my own estate?”

Nevander rolled his eyes. “Fine. You take the fun out of everything.”

Castien withdrew a heavy fur cloak from the wardrobe, then mimicked sealing his lips and motioned Nevander to continue his tale.

Nevander paced, the night in the stable flashing in his mind. Would Kallessa ever realize it had been him? “Her companion did something nice for me, and I repaid her unkindly. When I saw her leaving the hall, I thought I’d apologize.”

Castien raised his eyebrows.

He paused, jaw clenching. “Also, she’d been sitting next to that odious Warwick Ratliff.”

“Permission to speak?” Castien asked.

“Granted,” Nevander replied with an exaggerated sigh.

Castien flipped his hand dismissively. “As you know, I have attended every insipid ball and banquet at the estate since I was a child. Consequently, I know every tiresome person who is at this ridiculous festival by name.”

“Well, that’s all fine and well, but I haven’t gotten to the reason I’m here,” Nevander said.

“Spit it out then,” Castien said impatiently, though Nevander could tell his curiosity was piqued.

“I may have hidden behind the curtains in your father’s office with her.”

A broad grin spread across Castien’s face. “Oh, this is rich. What happened?”

“I didn’t intend to, but two more people came in. Maybe you should put some locks on these doors.”

“But then, where would all the lovers hide?” Castien teased.

Nevander stopped pacing and stared at him.

“So, who were they?” Castien asked.

“I thought you knew everyone here.”

“Not psychically.” Castien replied flatly.

“I never saw them, but they were speaking Birazahian.” The harsh, guttural language of the far north was unmistakable. Nevander had become fluent in the language while stationed along the Narian border during the war, though he’d struggled initially to wrap his mouth around the alien phrases. Dracian, his native speech, had a far more melodious flow, but most people of the southern countries spoke the common language.

Castien’s smile faded. He strolled to the fireplace, staring into the flames. “Interesting, but not unreasonable. More refugees have fled Birazahia since the war ended. Mother invited some dignitaries as a sign of peace. I wish she’d stop being so trusting.”

“True, but these two were talking about Dane.”

Castien froze, his gaze fixed on Nevander. “And what did they say?”

“That it was too bad he was the only dead Ravenbluff.”

Castien’s eyes narrowed to slits, his expression darkening like a thundercloud rolling in. For a tense moment, he went utterly still, the only movement the slight flare of his nostrils as he breathed. But when he finally spoke again, his voice held an edge of dismissal.

“Unfortunately, the Ravenbluffs aren’t universally loved, but that is something to go on. I’ll check the invitation list for our foreign guests.”

He jabbed the poker into the fire, sending sparks dancing up the chimney. Abruptly, he flopped into the chair closest to the hearth, his piercing gaze boring into Nevander.

“Now, tell me about the girl.”

Kallessa could have really used that chocolate biscuit right now. Her stomach fluttered as she paced across the plush carpet, her heels sinking with each step. For a girl whose most exciting event was the delivery of the monthly periodicals her aunt subscribed to, this day had been a whirlwind.

That mystery man’s oddly familiar voice taunted her. He’d been so charming and then, poof, gone. And the other people in the room, speaking in an unknown language... That mystery right there was enough to drive a person to distraction.

She needed air. Turning up the lamp on the desk, she pulled out the map from her handbag. Her finger traced their location in the south wing, following the hall to the nearest exit. With a deep breath, she picked up the lamp and stepped into the corridor. The rumbling of conversations sounded far away from the private quarters, and Kallessa heaved a sigh of relief. She'd had all the peopling she could stand for one day.

The soft swish of her skirts accompanied her as she pushed open the paned double doors. A rush of cool air enveloped her, sending a shiver down her spine. Maybe she should've worn one of Dovina’s flimsy shawls. Not that it would've warded off much chill. Back home, she had a soft woolen jacket for nights like these, not some useless lacey thing.

How much had Uncle Talos unwittingly paid for this new wardrobe? Probably more than he gave her and Aunt Gevene for the entire year. If nothing came of this trip, perhaps she could sell it all. Buy herself more time to figure things out.

Her dark blue gown had sleeves and skirts made of three layers of gauzy taffeta that rustled when she walked. It was beautiful, and she couldn’t fault her cousin for her taste. But after this time was over, she would have no use for such finery. Cleaning chicken coops and cooking dinner called for much simpler clothes.

Boxy holly shrubs lined the walkway, their berries turning red in the dim light. The path split three ways, and Kallessa raised her lantern, its glow quickly swallowed by the darkness. In the distance, a subtle light caught her eye.

As she approached, relief washed over her. The stables. Here, at least, she could relax without judgment. As she roamed among the stalls, breathing in clean hay and crisp night air, a low whinny caught her attention.

Her heart stopped. Those glossy dark eyes, that russet coat with a black mane... It couldn't be.

"Sunu?"

The mare neighed, shaking her head.

"Is that really you, girl?" Kallessa's hand trembled as she reached out. Sunu's velvety nose pushed into her palm, warm breath ghosting over her skin.

A lump formed in Kallessa's throat as tears pricked the corners of her eyes. This was a fragment of her past, a link she'd thought was severed forever when Uncle Talos sold off every last one of her family's horses.

Her fingers stroked Sunu's thick mane as memories flooded in. Days spent in the stables, mucking out stalls and brushing the mares until their coats gleamed, watching her mother train their horses, laughing at her little brother, Blain, as he fed them stolen sugar cubes. To be reunited with Sunu felt like a shard of her shattered life had been returned.

"You've grown up so pretty," Kallessa whispered, her voice thick. "Mother would be proud of you." If only she wasn't in this stupid dress. She would climb over the railing and hug the mare. Instead, she leaned over the wood beam, stroking Sunu's soft mane and satin cheeks.

The image of her mother, tiny but strong, working tirelessly to ensure Sunu's difficult birth, rose unbidden. Love and loss tangled in Kallessa's chest.

Tears fell, and she swiped them away with the back of her hand. "Oh, Mama," she choked out, "I miss you so much."

Nine

NEVANDER JOLTED AWAKE AS dawn's amber rays pierced the curtains, his ears ringing in the silence, broken only by distant cooing doves and the whisper of morning breezes against the windowpane. He pulled the lavender scented blankets over his head, cocooning himself in darkness, but restlessness itched beneath his skin, persistent and annoying. After punching the pillow a few times, he gave up on any ideas of sleeping in. His body needed to move. Flinging back the covers, he strode to the mirror, chill bumps racing across his bare skin.

He rotated his left shoulder, wincing at the soreness that followed him around like a nag, whispering of his failures. Once he'd led his men through relentless drills and skirmishes on a daily basis, and he'd accepted no excuses. Many a foggy morning was spent on the training grounds, his voice cutting through the mist: *Swords up! Shields locked! Move like one, fight like one!*

No room for weakness, then. No tolerance for imperfection. Now, the throbbing in his shoulder mocked those exacting standards.

His fingers traced the pink, puckered scar where the bullet had struck. A strange numbness tingled beneath his touch, and flickering images of darkness threatened to surface.

Akeela's insistent meow startled him back to the present, her soft fur brushing his leg. "I know, I know," he murmured, reaching down to scratch her ears. He let her out of the room to roam the estate on her own.

Shaking off the memories, Nevander pulled on his sparring leathers. It'd been too long since he'd had a good workout and he knew exactly where to go to fix that. He padded toward the sparring court, a wide open space nestled within the grounds with high stone walls encircling a broad area covered in fine, packed sand. It was nowhere near as expansive as the castle's training area, but the family home required a smaller number of guards.

The whistle of a blade slicing through crisp morning air reached him before he saw its wielder. A large man with a shaved head and carrot-colored beard dominated the yard, his figure-eight pattern smooth yet lethal.

"I know you're there," the man barked without turning.

Nevander's lips quirked. "Still have that second sense, I see."

The man swung around, his grin wide, revealing a row of perfectly white teeth, a stark contrast to his ruddy complexion. "Nevander, you old sailor. How the heck are you?"

"Declan, you look uglier and uglier every time I see you."

Declan's laugh boomed off the stone walls, free of court pretension. "That's what comes from being the biggest and baddest of them all." His keen eyes scanned Nevander, lingering on his shoulder. "Your left's sitting lower than your right."

Nevander's jaw tightened. Of course, word of his injury had spread. "Well, if the captain of the royal guard can't beat me back into shape, no one can." Declan had served the Ravenbluff family since he was old enough to hold a sword, relentlessly slashing his way to the top of the ranks.

"I'll take that challenge." Declan's grin faded. "Ever since Prince Dane's death and your sister going back home, I've been guarding a shadow. A resentful shadow."

Castien.

"I'll see what I can do." He and Castien had spent more than one misty morning here, pummeling each other during their teenage years. Yet now, Castien didn't look strong enough to hold a sword, much less swing it.

Declan raised an eyebrow. "Good luck. It's been even worse since he's risen from bed." He sliced his sword downward, as if cutting away his annoyance. "Walks around like a frozen corpse, just waiting to join his brother."

The gravity of Declan's words settled like a weight on Nevander's shoulders. He'd have to challenge Castien somehow, appeal to that pride

still pulsing beneath the prince's chilled exterior. But where to start? Castien was the most stubborn person Nevander knew.

"How is Ciana?" Declan asked, his bluster softening.

Nevander's eyes narrowed, catching the shift in Declan's tone. The brute's eyes had gone all soft when he'd asked about his sister. This was interesting. Ciana had spent almost eight years here at the estate before returning to Lionskye. Had something happened between them? Not that he would know. He'd hardly spent any time with her in the past two years. A pang of guilt shot through him, but he shoved it away. "That harpy? She's getting fat."

Declan's nostrils flared, eyes hardening. "Get in the ring, weakling. Let's see if we can beat some of that smart mouth off you."

Nevander laughed, picking up a sword. Oh yes, one thing was clear — Declan was in love with his sister.

Kallessa's eyelids fluttered open to the buttery rays of midmorning sun filtering into their room. How had she slept so late? But it was no wonder, considering everything that had happened the previous night. That horrible man at dinner, the curtain incident, and Sunu. What was her family's horse doing here?

Beside her, Dovina slept peacefully, hands curled under her cheek, golden curls cascading across the pillow. Without her usual snooty expression, she looked soft and young, like a seventeen-year-old should. Kallessa's chest tightened. Poor spoiled Dovina. Was there any hope for her?

Her stomach growled, shattering the serene silence. Quietly, she slipped out of bed and tied on her dressing gown. Two envelopes lay on the floor in front of the door.

She picked them up. The smooth paper felt luxurious, the handwriting a work of art with sweeping flourishes and intricate curls. She'd never seen her name written so beautifully. This letter was definitely going in her keepsake box at home.

After placing Dovina's letter on the nightstand, Kallessa poured a glass of water, gulping it down before breaking the seal on her own envelope.

Lady Kallessa,

We cordially invite you to join today's festivities. Please grace us with your presence at the south courtyard by one o'clock, before the last chime of the bell. The competitions will commence precisely at two o'clock. Further instructions will be provided upon your arrival. Kindly dress appropriately for the lawn games.

Lawn games? What were lawn games? When she was younger, before her exile from the Wynlar estate, her family went to plenty of social occasions. She'd played her share of card games, board games, and she was a pro at charades, but never lawn games. And how did one dress for that?

She glanced at the still slumbering Dovina. She could ask her, and Dovina would probably answer, all the while sneering at her stupid, unsocialized cousin. Nevermind, she would figure it out herself, like everything else.

A glimmer of hope sparked within her. Would Prince Castien be there? This might be her chance to tell him about her split skirts. Maybe she could even wear them. They were perfect for physical activities, right?

The aroma of bergamot tea wafted through the air, mingling with the scent of toast and bacon. Kallessa's mouth watered, but the thought of navigating the vast estate filled her with dread. Who invited this many people to their home, anyway?

She escaped to the adjoining bathroom. This had become her favorite room in the suite. Beside a large window sat an enormous tub. Copper piping ran down the wall, ending in a spout that brought forth water with the simple turn of a knob. The rush of hot water cascading into the tub was like magic. Kallessa sank into its warmth, a groan of pleasure escaping her throat. After two weeks of this, she'd feel completely deprived having to haul and heat her own water at home.

Only her outrageously growling stomach finally convinced her to leave the tub. After twisting her unruly curls into a knot, she pulled out her split skirts. Her fingers caressed every familiar stitch. While not as fine as Dovina's wardrobe, she'd used the best cotton and picot she could afford. The cheerful spring green was wrong for the season, but it would have to do.

Kallessa donned a simple white shirt and dark blue belt to complement the skirts. She strapped on her sturdiest boots, too. No need to stumble over herself in public any more than necessary.

Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself. It was time to face the day and, hopefully, the prince. Even with butterflies in her stomach, she couldn't risk fainting from hunger in front of him. Plastering what she hoped was a pleasant expression on her face, she reached for the door handle.

Kallessa arrived early to the south courtyard, the folded estate map inside the spacious pockets she'd sewn into her skirts. There was nothing worse than carrying things around in one's hands that could easily go into pockets. Why did men's trousers get to have all the fun?

Breakfast had been a pleasant surprise, being served in one of the receiving rooms. She'd eaten her fill of a pomegranate mousse and baked apples with cranberry chutney. And a flaky scone that she dipped in milky dark tea, rich with spices she couldn't discern.

People stood in small circles, eating and chatting, so she'd found a chair in a corner and ate in peace. Everyone was content to leave her alone, just the way she liked it.

Yet now, the courtyard teemed with anticipation, the air alive with the conversations and laughter of fellow guests. Banners painted with dragons and crescent moons swayed gently in the breeze, while lanterns hung from towering oak trees, their vibrant colors a stark contrast to the autumn foliage. Kallessa's gaze drifted upward, catching sight of the waxing crescent moon high in the early afternoon sky. It was a picture perfect fall day.

If only it weren't full of chaos and noise.

The clang of horseshoes, thud of arrows, and whack of croquet mallets rang through the yard as guests warmed up for the games. As she walked past a tittering pair of younger women, dressed in low-heeled boots and skirts that grazed their ankles, she heard them saying something about a prize too.

She really needed to get her hands on that schedule.

Prince Castien held court in a sunny part of the lawn, his outfit a stark contrast to the day's warmth. He wore woolen black trousers and a dark blue overcoat. A fur-trimmed hat crowned his glossy dark hair. She was

sweating just looking at him. It had to be seventy degrees out, the autumn sun warm, and only the slightest breeze tickled the golden leaves in the surrounding massive oaks.

What was his story? She should have listened closer to Dovina's gossip, she supposed, but she hated gossip. Many times it was incorrect, and if not, at least mean spirited.

Across the yard, a cluster of people gathered around a man with an air of rigid precision. His black and white suit, crisp cravat, and gleaming buttons matched his stoic expression. He guarded a pristine white table bearing a polished mahogany box, its brass hinges glinting in the sunlight. That was a man that took his job seriously. Whatever it was.

"Name, please," he demanded of each person in line, his wax pencil scratching against his pad with each response.

Kallessa's palms grew clammy as she approached. "Is this for everyone?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Did you receive an invitation to the games?"

She nodded, her throat suddenly dry.

"Name, please," he repeated, impatience coloring his tone.

"Kallessa Dahoko."

He flipped through the pages, each flick of the wrist dislodging a muted rustle. A swift swipe of his pencil as he crossed off her name, and then he shuffled through a box before handing her a card. After that, he completely dismissed her, looking to the person standing behind her.

She wandered to an unoccupied bench under a great oak and sat. The bench was pleasantly cool, and out of the eyes of onlookers. She opened the envelope to reveal the number 18 in gleaming gold script—a number that anchored her to a part of this festivity, somehow.

The clock tower's imposing gong for a quarter to one sent vibrations through her body, raising goosebumps on her arms. *Don't make a fool out of yourself today, Kallessa.*

The lineup before the table had lengthened, a colorful caterpillar of guests wriggling with an almost tangible excitement. In its midst, she spotted Dovina and tried to wave to her, but she didn't see her.

She walked up to her cousin, the springy grass now flattened under so many feet.

"Dovina, do you know what this is all about?"

"Didn't you read the schedule?" Dovina's tone dripped with condescension.

Kallessa would have, if Dovina hadn't snatched it up, holding it like a drake and his treasure.

"I don't know where it is."

Dovina rolled her eyes. "We are to be assigned our teammates for the games. I heard that the queen herself was responsible for the matches."

"We don't get to pick our own teammates?"

"What's the fun in that?" Dovina's eyes sparkled. "By the way, I met the most interesting man last night at dinner. He was dreamy, but I still have to meet the prince."

"Have you found a way to meet with him?" Kallessa asked.

Dovina inched forward in the line, Kallessa moving with her. "No, but I'm sure I'll find a way. Perhaps today. Isn't he handsome?"

Kallessa glanced towards Prince Castien. The crown must have blinded Dovina, because to Kallessa, he just looked... tired. Fatigue shadowed his pale face, and his back was ramrod straight, as if he was trying entirely too hard to convince those around him he was fine. Yes, he was handsome, but something marred his features, something too deep for her to figure.

As the clock tower's bells tolled one o'clock, Dovina triumphantly got her card. "I'm number 40. My table is over there. What number are you?"

"Eighteen."

Dovina's gaze darted across the clearing, her bottom lip jutting out. "Of course, you get to be next to the prince's table."

Kallessa's heart leapt into her throat. Sure enough, the table nearest the prince bore a placard for numbers one through 30.

"Don't blow your chance, cousin." Dovina grasped her arm, her grip uncomfortably tight. "And put in a good word for me."

"Oh, of course." Kallessa murmured as her chest tightened. This was her moment. The one that might change her life. As long as she didn't botch it up.

"You're out of practice, old man." Declan laughed, his voice echoing through the courtyard. He wasn't even breathing hard.

Nevander felt like an old man. His shoulder throbbed, a deep ache radiating down to his fingertips. Nearly a year, and still the wound haunted him.

The rest of his body felt pleasantly beaten, muscles being worked more than they had in months.

"It feels good to be back in the ring." Sweat dripped relentlessly from his forehead, tracing a path down his face and stinging his eyes. He bent over, his palms braced against his hips, trying to catch his breath.

"Now if we can just get Castien in here," Declan muttered.

"I know."

Nevander needed time to figure out Castien. Over two years had passed since he'd spent any significant time with him. And time had altered them, turning them into unfamiliar versions of themselves. Although the essence of his childhood friend was still there, Castien almost felt like a stranger.

The bell in the courtyard rang one o'clock, stretching out across the midday air, knocking Nevander out of his ruminating. If only he could go bathe his sore muscles in a hot tub, but no, he had to show up to the games.

"Your prince has a wicked sense of humor, you know that?" Nevander said as he stood and groaned.

Declan chuckled as they returned their weapons to the racks. "Glad I'm just a lowly guardsman. No need for me to play in ridiculous games."

Nevander wiped down the cool iron of his sword with a towel before mopping his face.

"Care to bet on a proper fight?" Declan asked.

So Declan still fought in underground fights. Even though they were illegal in the country, it didn't stop half the lords and ladies from showing up and betting on him.

Nevander wasn't sure how he felt about that. "Sorry, my every moment is scheduled this week."

And Nevander knew, with a bitter certainty, that if he faltered, if he failed to arrive on time, Castien would tell the entire court about the failed prince of Dracia, the one who let everyone die.

Ten

PRINCE CASTIEN SEEMED TO take great pleasure in watching the guests' faces as he called out names, pairing teammates for the games. Most looked happy, some looked surprised, a few actually looked angry.

His face reminded Kallessa of a trickster, those pale gray eyes shaded with dark lashes against the midday sun, his posture held alert, like a predator waiting to pounce. The prince's voice, clear and precise, cut through the muffled hum of anticipation, each name announced, spreading ripples across the crowd.

"Kallessa Dahoko," the prince said, his sly gaze falling to her like a hawk spotting a dove in a field.

Kallessa's heart leapt. This was her chance. She took a deep breath, her split skirts swishing as she approached. "Yes, my lord?"

"Come forward," he commanded.

The grass crunched beneath her boots. "My lord, I have a great idea I would like to present to you."

"All great ideas must be held until after the games," he decreed, each word pronounced like a chisel shaping stone.

Kallessa's throat tightened. She couldn't give up that easily. What about Aunt Gevene?

"M-my lord—"

The prince silenced her with a wave. "I will call for you tomorrow morning. Now please stop talking."

Kallessa snapped her mouth shut, her cheeks warming. Is this how all royalty spoke? She stared at her shoes in humiliated silence.

"For the remainder of the games, you are paired with Warwick Ratliff."

Kallessa's head snapped up. Sure enough, Warwick approached, his steps determined and heavy, like a drumbeat of impending doom, a self-satisfied grin on his face. Today he wore a fuchsia suit that matched his flushed cheeks, his blond hair already falling into his eyes.

Her stomach dropped. No, no, no. He gave her the creeps, and she'd barely escaped him the previous evening. She couldn't possibly spend the entire two weeks in his company. There was an enormous lake on the estate, according to the map. What if they got too close to it, and he had the sudden urge to drown her? Or worse, marry her?

She searched Prince Castien's face, but he met her gaze with cool indifference, his expression as neutral as the stone statues that lined the garden paths.

Panic washed through her, a drowning feeling she knew intimately. That feeling she had every time her choices were robbed from her. Like the choice of where she lived, what she could do, see, or go. Drowning in that vast sea, where she had no power over her own life. Where someone else dictated her every waking moment.

But… She wasn't in Teansong. Her uncle wasn't here. The tiniest lifeline bubbled up from the deep sea of her soul.

And from somewhere in those depths, she found the will to speak.

"It's not possible, my lord," she blurted out.

His eyes narrowed. "And why not?"

She swallowed an enormous lump in her throat. Why not indeed?

Kallessa frantically scanned the courtyard, praying that someone—anyone—would rescue her. Was she really going to have to do this? Warwick's brows drew together, his mouth opening to speak.

Doom. That's what would come out of his mouth.

So, in a moment of desperation, her mouth betrayed her, and out came *the lie*. "I am engaged," she declared, her voice quivering.

Prince Castien's eyebrows rose. "Oh indeed, and who is your fiancé?" The question hung in the air, heavy and expectant.

What was she going to say to that? Surely she wouldn't have shown up without her fiancé. *Oh, what a tangled web we weave…*

Kallessa’s gaze darted around the courtyard, a roaring sound in her ears. Had everyone fallen silent, or could she just not hear anyone else over the frantic pounding of her heart? This was the most ridiculous lie she’d ever told. And to a prince, of all people! She wasn’t even a good liar. Any moment, she’d be escorted off the premises, cast out for trying to fool the future king of Krithadea.

Suddenly, a vision appeared from under a tree. A tall man with long golden hair and a tawny beard strode toward the courtyard, his powerful legs devouring the ground with his long stride. He looked even more dangerous than the first time she’d seen him at the inn, a scowl etched on his rugged face. His sparring leathers clung to his muscular frame, a stark contrast to the formal attire surrounding them. And oh, did he wear them well. She gulped, her mouth suddenly barren of all moisture.

Then, shocking herself, she extended her trembling hand, pointing her finger toward the vision of masculinity, a man she never thought she would see again.

“Him.”

“He is your fiancé?” Prince Castien asked, his gaze fixed on the approaching man.

Kallessa’s heart pounded in her ears. What had she done? But there was no going back now. She had to own it. “Yes,” she said, hoping her voice sounded more confident than she felt.

The prince slowly nodded, his expression unreadable. “And what is his name?”

Heat bloomed across Kallessa’s cheeks as her mind raced back to that fateful night at the inn—rough hands, startled eyes, and the scent of hay. The only clue to his identity had been a hastily scribbled initial on a slip of paper tucked into the package of ginger. That single letter “N” now taunted her.

This was bad. The golden man, only known as “N” drew closer with each passing heartbeat. She had to act now. If she stood there until he arrived, the

shrewd prince would know she'd just boldly lied to his face. And any chance of freedom for herself or Aunt Gevene would be destroyed.

So she did what any self-respecting girl would have done. Faked it. Kallessa squared her shoulders and strode toward the man, praying her legs wouldn't betray her trembling. She had mere moments before they'd be in earshot of Prince Castien. Mere moments to salvage this disaster of her own making.

Nevander's body protested every step as he strode onto the grounds. His shoulder ached worse than it had in months, thanks to Declan's beatings. He'd clearly underestimated how out of practice he was, the ghost of each clashing blow still vibrating through his tired muscles.

Catching Castien's gaze, he squinted. Against the cacophony of the garden, where the buzz of conversation competed with birdsongs, his friend wore an expression that spelled mischief. Next to him stood… her. The woman from the inn, from behind the curtains. The one who'd been haunting his thoughts. She was pointing at him, eyes wide like a deer caught in a crossbow's sights.

Nearby stood Warwick Ratliff, eyebrows furrowed, stance rigid as a statue.

After a tense exchange between Castien and Kallessa, she hurried toward Nevander, her skirts swishing with tantalizing determination. The midday sun caught her mahogany curls, setting off strands of fiery red and russet. Those golden eyes fixed on him with an intensity that sent heat coursing through his veins. He was so lost in watching her approach, that he stood there, frozen, until she was right before him.

She reached out, surprisingly strong fingers wrapping around his wrist. The contact jolted through him like lightning.

"You are my fiancé," she declared, breathless.

Nevander's mind went blank. "I'm sorry, what?"

He tore his eyes from her and glanced at Castien in the distance, who flashed the most devious grin he'd ever seen before turning away to speak to a guest.

Kallessa's grasp tightened, her warmth seeping into his skin. "Oh, please, I'm so sorry, it's just- if you aren't, then I'm stuck with Elbow Man!"

Nevander's gaze was drawn back to her, caught in those luminous eyes for a timeless moment.

You are my fiancé. The words echoed in his mind. He'd been no one's fiancé. Never wanted to be. Duty. Burdens. Tragedy. Each one stacked up against his heart like a wall of granite.

But, for the sake of this woman, and to uncover the truth of what was going on here—which he highly suspected was Castien's doing—he would play along.

For now.

Kallessa released his wrist and stood back, biting her lip. "I've done a terrible thing. I'm so sorry. I'll go back and tell him I was joking." Her gaze flicked back down and she swallowed. "I'll find a way to make it through the week."

He'd stood silent for too long. Studying her crestfallen expression, a surprising pang of protectiveness surged through him.

Instead, he gently took her hand, wrapping it around his arm. Her fingers were damp and hot. "Elbow man, hm?" he asked, quirking a brow.

"It's a long story," she said with a helpless shrug, glancing over at the prince and Warwick.

"Let's go introduce ourselves, shall we?" He led her across the lush lawn to where Castien sat, bundled up like it was midwinter.

"Ah, the fiancé appears," Castien remarked, voice carrying on the warm breeze.

"So sorry for my tardiness, my lord," Nevander replied, his face composed despite the indignant laughter bubbling inside him.

Castien turned his attention to Kallessa, who still gripped his arm. "Introduce us to your fiancé, would you, dear Kallessa?"

Kallessa stood frozen in place, her eyes wide, like a cornered fox. Then it dawned on Nevander. She didn't know it was him behind the curtains last night. Had it only been the night before? It felt like a lifetime ago.

"Nevander, my lord," he interjected, voice steady. He felt the grip on his arm loosen slightly before tightening again. Then she blushed the most attractive shade of pink, her mouth forming a perfect "O" as she looked up at him, recognition sparking in her eyes.

Castien turned to Warwick. “I do apologize for the misunderstanding, but you know how these things go. Whatever number our fiancé,” he gestured to Nevander, “had, is now yours.”

Warwick cut them both a glare and stalked off, mumbling under his breath.

“Move along. I have more teams to form.” Castien waved them away, feigning boredom. Nevander bit back a laugh. Had Castien always been this devious? Sure, he remembered the time Castien had orchestrated an elaborate prank on one of his tutors years ago, but this level of meddling took it to another level.

He escorted Kallessa toward the large refreshment tent, the scent of apple cider and cinnamon beckoning him. Apparently, Kallessa would be his companion for the duration. There was no way Warwick wouldn’t spread the story. Probably turn Nevander into the villain.

“It was you. Last night, I mean.” Kallessa’s voice held a sense of wonder.

“Yes. Would you like some apple cider?” He poured himself an enormous cup and gulped it down before refilling his mug. All that running around in the ring had made him thirsty.

“Behind the curtain.” This comment, she whispered, glancing around them.

He handed her a cup of cider and led her away from listening ears. The upper-class court was full of busybodies who loved scandal more than their next breath.

He waited until they were under a large oak, whose branches reached out far enough to block prying eyes. She’d released her grip on him, watching him rather warily for someone who’d just declared herself engaged to him.

He kept his tone neutral, harmless. “Yes, that was me.”

“And, at the inn, that was you as well,” she confirmed, barely audible over a distant laughter and chatter.

Nevander leaned against the oak. “I had intended to apologize to you last night. It was inexcusable what I did. You were only trying to be kind.” Yet, he remembered the feel of her, crushed against him for that one moment, before the horrors of war had burned it away.

“I’m the one who should apologize for stealing your room.” Her eyes danced with uncertainty. Was she remembering that night in the stable, too?

“Is your companion here also?” He knew she was, but he wanted to keep Kallessa talking, to relax her. And maybe just to hear that soft southern

accent a little longer.

The dappled light from the rustling tree played across her face as she glanced around. “Dovina? Yes, I’m not sure where, but she is.”

So that was the blond room thief’s name.

“So we’re engaged, are we?” He said it lightly, teasingly, though the thought sent a nervous ache into his stomach.

Kallessa glanced up through those long, dark lashes. “I am so sorry! The prince has offered me an audience tomorrow morning, and I’ll tell him the truth then.”

“He granted you an audience?” Nevander raised his eyebrows, impressed.

“Yes, you see, I have this idea.” Excitement flashed in her eyes before she dropped them. “It actually seems stupid now.”

Castien was going to have so much fun with this, the bastard. But so could he. If he was posing as a son of a shipbuilder on holiday, who would care what he did? The anonymity was freeing.

Nevander turned to Kallessa, gripping her small hand in his. She looked delicate, but he could feel the strength in her slender fingers. “Don’t tell him.”

Her confused look had him clarifying his meaning.

A playful smile teased his lips. “Don’t tell him you aren’t my fiancé.”

Eleven

KALLESSA'S BREATH CAUGHT AS she stared at the man before her. The rugged soldier from the inn and the mysterious figure behind the curtain were one and the same. When she'd interrupted his sleep at the inn, he was like a tiger, feral with pent up power in his muscles. His hair had been full of hay and his beard, out of control. Stains and mud covered his clothes, and he'd looked travel worn and tired.

An utterly different man stood before her. Now his hair was glossy and his beard well trimmed. Even his leathers looked tailor made for his muscular form. An enticing aroma of sweat and sunshine radiated from him.

"I'm sorry. I just need a moment," she stammered, her eyes tracing every feature of his face. "Nevander," she breathed, his name a question and an answer all at once.

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

A strange curiosity bloomed within her, a desire to unravel the enigma before her. It was terrifying, exhilarating. She shouldn't want to know this man, and yet...

"We're only at this festival for a fortnight, then we can return to our homes, with none the wiser," Kallessa said, trying to rationalize the situation. Then she'd go back to her boring life, look back on these two crazy weeks and laugh. Some day.

"True. No one will care about a shipbuilder's son, but what about you, my lady?" Nevander asked.

Kallessa huffed a self depreciating laugh, ignoring the flutter in her stomach. “Oh, don’t worry about me. I’m invisible to society.”

“I find that hard to believe.” His murmured words sent a flush creeping up her neck.

The clock tower’s sudden clanging made her jump, her heart racing for reasons that had nothing to do with the noise.

“I suppose that means it’s two o’clock.” Nevander sighed. “Shall we?”

As they walked arm-in-arm towards the event tables, Kallessa asked, “Could you fill me in on what’s happening? My cousin has the schedule and I’ve been stumbling around trying to figure it out.”

“Castien, the prince, and his mother, Queen Lyra, have put on the most annoying event in all of Krithadean history,” Nevander replied, his voice tinged with exasperation.

A burst of laughter escaped Kallessa’s lips. She quickly covered her mouth, glancing around to see if anyone noticed. A few dignified ladies shot disapproving looks in their direction, but most of the festival-goers remained oblivious, caught up in their own conversations.

“You speak as if you know them,” she said.

“My father occasionally does business with the royal house of Krithadea. As the finest shipbuilder in Dracia, everyone needs his ships, including the king,” Nevander explained.

“Where are you from?” She couldn’t seem to stop the questions falling from her lips.

“Dracia. In the capital city of Vaston. Have you ever visited?”

A chill swept through Kallessa. Too many memories threatened to overwhelm her, the same ones that had plagued her for the past five years. If only she had gone with her parents to that fateful music festival so long ago, would they still be alive? And then there was Tynan Respa. The hopes and dreams of a young and stupid girl. His poetry had swept her off her feet.

She cleared her throat, trying to shake off the weight of those spiraling thoughts. “The last time was about six years ago, when I was sixteen. It’s a breathtaking city. The rocky shoreline is so different from Teansong’s sandy beaches. I remember the tall stone buildings clinging to the cliffs, as if they grew straight out of the rock itself.”

“It’s a wonderful city,” Nevander agreed, his eyes searching her face. “So, you grew up in Teansong? Are you related to the Wynlar family in that

area?”

Kallessa froze. Which Wynlar family? The present one headed by her cruel uncle who’d cast her out? Or the loving family she’d lost, the one she missed with every fiber of her being?

She opened her mouth to respond, but she couldn’t. Homesickness washed over her as they entered the courtyard, the mingled scents of spiced cider and sweet alyssum triggering memories she’d buried under her daily grind.

Afternoons in town with Father. Sipping tea, nibbling on fresh cinnamon rolls, window shopping. He’d always taken a day out of the month just for them, indulging her every whim. Ironically, it was her father who spent the day with her, not her mother, as she bought new ribbons, trinkets, and bolts of fabric for dresses.

She never thought those days would end.

Kallessa swallowed hard, forcing the lump in her throat down. “You don’t want to hear about my boring past.” Her laugh sounded hollow, even to her own ears. “I’ll tell you when we’re old and gray and have been married for thirty years.”

Nevander’s chuckle fizzled into the warm breeze, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. “That’s right, darling. Let’s see what the prince has in store for us.”

Prince Castien, still seated and bundled in a coat, appeared to be intentionally ignoring a gorgeous woman in a stunning gold gown. He studied a piece of parchment in his hand with forced intensity while she laughed and chattered, her hands brushing her hair and neck with flirtatious gestures. Odd, hadn’t Dovina told her the prince was looking for a wife?

A man in black and white caught Prince Castien’s attention. The prince nodded, and the man raised a horn to his mouth, its sound echoing through the crowd.

“The treasure hunt shall begin at sunrise tomorrow and end at dusk,” he announced. “And the winner will receive the Axan trophy to display until next year. Participants will play the games today from 2 to 5 o’clock. Good luck to you all!”

Kallessa’s stomach churned. The last time she’d played any games was back when she was that “Wynlar” Nevander asked about. Not anymore. She was no longer like these people who spent their days playing lawn games, sipping cider and flirting with handsome soldiers. She was the one who rose

at dawn to clean and cook and tend the gardens. What was Aunt Gevene doing while she was away? Probably shopping for new salt jars and romance novels. There wouldn't be a penny left to their names by the time she returned.

"I don't really want to play the games," she confessed to Nevander.

Nevander studied her face for a moment, conflict flashing in his eyes before he fixed his gaze on the prince, eyes narrowing. "I propose a deal," he offered. "We'll endure these games for the next two days, but I'll find a way for us to escape the rest of the week. How does that sound?"

Kallessa followed Nevander's gaze to Prince Castien. Something was going on here that she was missing, but she didn't have the faintest idea what it could be. It sparked her curiosity, though. And honestly, she needed a distraction.

Finally she said, "Alright. But let's try to be last."

Kallessa caught Warwick glaring at them as they approached, but he had a companion, at least. A thin elderly lady who whacked him in the shin with her walking stick whenever he lagged behind.

"Lady Tursam of the Krithadean court," Nevander murmured in her ear. "She doesn't really need that walking stick. She's just fond of cracking people's shins when they ignored her."

Heat from his breath lingered in her hair, raising goosebumps on her neck. "Oh my," Kallessa breathed. Oh, she had to stop that. She sounded like a damsel in one of her aunt's novels.

"Number eighteen," the announcer called out. Her stomach dropped.

"That's us." Nevander took her hand and pulled her forward.

Using a soft rope, they bound her left and Nevander's right ankle together, and even through her layers of skirts, heat radiated from his leg to hers. Heat bloomed across her chest that had nothing to do with the warm afternoon sun. Others lined up beside them, the colored chalk forming a boundary line on the grass. On the opposite end of the field, a rope hung with crescent moon banners flapped in the breeze.

"Your task is to run to the rope, touch the banners, and race back to this line. The first one back wins!" the announcer bellowed through his horn.

This is what the dignified society of Krithadea did for amusement? A wave of awkwardness washed over her. It didn't help that she was already distracted by *him*.

Nevander turned to her. “Ready?” The afternoon sun bathed his face in a golden glow, his green eyes glinting with flecks of silver. He was literally attached to her, his face mere inches away.

“I… um,” Kallessa stammered.

No, she was not ready. But Nevander continued.

“The key is to move in sync with me. As I raise my right foot, you must lift your left, and vice versa,” he said.

She tore her eyes from his and gazed across the field. Everyone else seemed completely at ease. “This is ridiculous,” she mumbled, her voice barely audible amidst the commotion.

“Go!” the announcer shouted.

Kallessa froze. Laughter erupted from the other players as they hopped and ran forward, but she could only stare at their joined ankles, feeling like an idiot.

“Lift your left foot,” Nevander instructed. As he attempted to lift his right foot, Kallessa reluctantly followed, but the moment her foot left the ground, she was toppling over. Strong hands gripped her shoulders as Nevander steadied himself and placed her foot back on the ground.

“Come on now, we can do this. Let’s just march. Left, then right, left, then right.” Nevander encouraged, his voice soothing amid the chaos.

She took a steadying breath. She could do this. Heck, she could race a horse over fences. Surely she could march down a field and back with a man tied to her ankle.

“Alright, here we go. Now, left.” Nevander directed.

Kallessa cautiously lifted her left as he lifted his right and they stepped forward.

“Now, right,” he commanded.

She stepped with her right, feeling like a child first learning to walk.

“Left,” he said again.

She picked up her left, her movements still hesitant. The soft twine grazed her skin, chafing the fabric of her stocking-covered ankle.

“Now right.”

With each step, they found an awkward rhythm, and marched across the field. Someone had spent a lot of time clipping the grass to a smooth carpet, so if Kallessa tripped, she couldn’t blame it on the terrain. Somehow, they reached the rope, where she triumphantly slapped a banner, marking their turning point.

“Care to pick it up a notch?” Nevander suggested, his lips tugging into a smile. Across the field, a young couple stumbled, bursting into giggles as they tried to right themselves. Nearby, an older gentleman, his long coat billowing behind him, maintained a dignified pace, his partner’s hand resting lightly on his arm. One couple was about to cross the finish line, with cheers echoing across the courtyard.

“Does it really matter?” she asked.

“Of course it matters. We have to finish the race. Imagine the rumors if we didn’t,” he replied, his voice mocking as he pressed a hand to his chest.

Kallessa rolled her eyes. “I don’t think they’ll be talking about the race.”

“Less talking, more walking. Now pick up your left, a bit faster, come on.”

As they sped up, Kallessa finally felt the rhythm taking hold, a surge of exhilaration coursing through her. “You must have been a good marching soldier,” she huffed.

“I was born with sea legs, but I do have more coordination than most.” Nevander said, grinning.

Kallessa laughed as Nevander quickened his steps, propelling her to almost run. The heat of his leg against hers, the sound of his breath mingling with hers, and the resonance of his voice made her feel lightheaded with giddiness. Nevander’s laughter rang out with hers.

Finally, they reached the finish line, and Kallessa doubled over, clutching her middle, trying to catch her breath. “Oh my, I really thought we wouldn’t make it.” She straightened, pushing damp strands from her forehead. “But you left no soldier behind, hmm?”

Nevander’s laughter softened, then ceased altogether, his gaze fixed on something Kallessa couldn’t decipher. “No... not this time,” he whispered.

Nevander scanned the bustling courtyard, dissecting the lively crowd. Laughter and conversation mingled with clinking glasses, a cacophony of normalcy that felt alien to him now. He recognized half the faces, yet they looked through him, unseeing. Two years was all it had taken to reshape him.

Prince Nevander of Dracia had short hair, no beard, and impeccable manners, always dressed in fine court clothing. Nevander, the sea captain, had none of those things. Of course, he could still dredge up the proper manners when needed, but the genteel young prince was long gone, incinerated on distant battlefields.

His gaze sharpened, searching for anyone who lingered too long on Castien. Despite their earlier discussion, he had little to go on besides his friend's intuition and a single overheard conversation between two disgruntled Birazahians.

Castien's face had faded to an alarming pallor as the day progressed. Nevander's jaw clenched, frustration burning in his chest. Castien wasn't ready for this, but he couldn't show concern without attracting unwanted scrutiny.

"I can't believe we almost won that round of croquet," Kallessa said, pushing damp curls from her neck.

Nevander's pulse quickened, his skin prickling with a sudden heat that had nothing to do with the afternoon sun. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the delicate curve of her neck, the way her skin glistened. The urge to trace that path with his fingertips, to feel the softness of her skin beneath his calloused hands, was almost overwhelming.

He imagined pulling her close, inhaling the scent of her sunshine and canary blossoms, with a hint of something uniquely *her*. He could almost taste the saltiness of her skin on his tongue, feel the thrumming of her heartbeat against his lips as he trailed kisses along her neck, up to the corner of her mouth.

A shudder ran through him, blood thrumming with long-dormant need. He clenched his jaw as he fought for control.

She was too pure, untouched by the darkness that haunted him. He had no right to taint her, to drag her into his shadows. But oh, how he wanted to. How he ached to lose himself, to let her light chase away his never ending night, if only for a moment.

The sound of the five o'clock bell jarred his senses, signaling the end of the games.

"That was the fastest three hours of my life," Kallessa said, her grin lighting up her entire face. "And we survived with a small amount of dignity still intact."

Nevander had been surrounded by court beauties his entire life, could have had his pick of them. But not a one of those perfectly coiffed, heavily painted ladies could have compared to Kallessa in that moment. Her breathless laughter sent warmth blooming through his chest. And for a fleeting instant, he savored the taste of what happiness could be like.

That was, until a walking stick swung into view.

Lady Tursam, her tall narrow face and body, came into view next. He felt Kallessa tense next to him.

"Who are you?" Lady Tursam inquired, her sharp gaze fixed on Nevander. He'd conversed with Lady Tursam occasionally in the past. Could it be possible she didn't recognize him?

He offered a slight bow. "I am but a shipbuilder's son. My name is Nevander."

Lady Tursam huffed disdainfully, turning her attention to Kallessa. "And you?"

"Kallessa, my lady."

Relief washed over Nevander as Lady Tursam's walking stick remained planted in the grass.

"I am Lady Tursam. I hear that you're newly engaged."

So, Warwick had been talking already.

Lady Tursam continued, her sharp eyes narrowing, "As a woman who was married for forty years before Lord Tursam's passing, let me give you some advice. Always sleep in separate beds, otherwise the passion will inevitably fade." Her thin eyebrow arched. "A marriage lasts longest when certain boundaries are kept, even between husband and wife."

Nevander bit his lips to stifle a smile. Poor Lord Tursam, rest his soul. He pictured the stern-faced widow whacking her late husband on the shins for daring to kiss her in an unapproved fashion. The image nearly drew a snort of laughter, but years of court training kept his face neutral.

He nodded respectfully. "We appreciate your wise counsel. Even though our courtship was short, sometimes all it takes is a single moment to realize it's true love. But we will heed your advice for longevity."

Kallessa shifted beside him, her cheeks blushing a bright pink, her eyes wide. Nevander, having learned the art of stillness in battle, understood this could turn into one if not played correctly. One must never reveal more than necessary, for any information given could be used against them. He probably should have kept it to a simple thank you.

Lady Tursam's eyes narrowed to slits. "Our prince is relying on the success of this festival. It is crucial for the morale of Krithadea, especially after the war and Prince Dane's demise."

"Indeed, my lady," Nevander replied, careful to keep his tone neutral.

"You are patronizing me," Lady Tursam accused.

"Oh no, Lady Tursam, we wouldn't do that," Kallessa quickly interjected, concern replacing the flush in her cheeks.

"Where are you from?" Lady Tursam inquired.

"Teansong, my lady."

"A rather provincial town. It would serve you well to observe your surroundings, young lady. Perhaps talk less."

Kallessa's eyes widened, and she fell silent immediately.

"Do not disappoint Krithadea, young man."

Nevander had no clue what the older woman was referring to, but experience taught him to agree with anything Lady Tursam said.

He inclined his head. "I wouldn't dream of it, my lady. May we escort you somewhere? This year's vintage is quite refreshing."

Lady Tursam raised an eyebrow. "As opposed to the vintage of two years ago? I would say that was a little on the chilly side. I can see my company has worn on you." She turned her attention back to Kallessa. "Come see me for any marriage advice you may have, young lady. Good day to you two."

With a swing of her walking stick, Lady Tursam headed toward her next victims.

Kallessa exhaled heavily. "She's quite intense."

"Yes, quite intense and quite nosy," Nevander replied. Lady Tursam's words carried an underlying tone that piqued his curiosity. She'd clearly alluded to the poisoning. Only a few people knew what really happened to Dane and Castien, and it seemed she might just be one of them.

As much as he didn't want this day to end, he needed to talk to Castien. The sun hung low, casting a warm golden glow over the sprawling estate. The crowd dispersed, heading back to their rooms or home for the evening.

"Shall we retire to the estate to rest before dinner?" Nevander asked. He could have spent the rest of the evening with her, but duty called. As always…

"Honestly, yes. I haven't sweated this much since I chased a goose around the garden that had stolen aunt Gevene's slipper. I have no idea what the goose wanted with it, but I chased it for a good hour before wrestling it

from her grasp. I'm not sure why I bothered as the slipper was ruined by then, but Aunt Gevene was happy to get it back all the same."

Nevander chuckled. He could easily see that image, so innocent and sweet. She really was just a country girl, a far cry from the cunning court vipers he'd encountered. And she wasn't his to taint.

"I think I've forgotten how to have fun," Nevander mused as they strolled arm in arm toward the south entrance. The setting sun cast long shadows across the meticulously tended gardens.

Kallessa laughed and squeezed his arm. "Perhaps you should fake engagements more often."

Kallessa felt weightless, her steps light as she floated up the path to the south entrance. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had that much fun. Her body ached pleasantly from the exercise, and Nevander's laughter still rang in her ears.

Lost in her reverie, she didn't see Dovina until they were practically nose to nose.

"What is this about?" Dovina demanded, waving a sheet of heavy cream stationery erratically, her face flushed and eyes wild.

Kallessa stumbled back. "What is what about?"

Dovina shoved the paper in Kallessa's face, nearly hitting her nose.

Kallessa took the stationery from her cousin's shaking hand and quickly skimmed the elegant script.

In light of new circumstances, Lady Kallessa's personal effects have been relocated from her previous chambers to the adjoining guest rooms in the east wing of Ravenbluff Estate, next to her newly betrothed fiancé.

Twelve

KALLESSA'S HEART DROPPED INTO her stomach. She read the words on the page again, hoping that for some reason it would say, *just kidding,* at the bottom. Or that it was addressed to the wrong person. But no, in stark black script on official Ravenbluff stationery that was probably worth a day's pay back home, was her name. Dovina's labored breaths beside her only amplified the pressure building in her chest, waiting for an explanation she couldn't even begin to give.

How had one little lie to get out of being held hostage by "elbow man" turned into this? The words blurred as she looked through the page, past the page, struggling for an answer that wouldn't come.

If she told the truth, Dovina would tell anyone who'd listen about the tale of poor Kallessa, who couldn't get a husband even when she faked it. And what if word reached the prince that she had boldly lied to his face? Her chances of selling her split skirt idea would be history. Not to mention the consequences for poor Nevander, whom she had convinced to go along with this madness. What had she done? Her breathing grew shallow, her heart pounding in her ears.

Kallessa mentally shook herself. She had to get it together. Do this for Aunt Gevene if no one else. She could play along for two weeks, then she and Nevander could just call off their little "engagement", dismiss it as youthful folly. The elders would roll their eyes, and the younger folks would laugh it off. Probably be glad that handsome Nevander was back on the market.

Taking a deep breath, Kallessa lifted her eyes to meet Dovina's gaze. Her cousin's pretty face was blotchy, her eyes glistening.

Before she could utter a word, Dovina burst into tears.

"Why you?" She asked, her voice breaking. "You're - you're nobody! And you got engaged in one day? What did you do? You have to tell me!" Dovina halted her outburst and scanned the hallway for any eavesdroppers. Then, grabbing Kallessa's arm, she dragged her down the hall and into their, no, Dovina's room.

Her cousin pulled Kallessa down to the bed and sat beside her, a scary look of determination in her still damp eyes.

"Have you met the prince yet?" Dovina demanded, her voice rising in pitch.

"Ah, only briefly," Kallessa responded hesitantly, leaning away from her overeager cousin.

"What was he like? Was he charming? I bet he's even more handsome up close."

Kallessa thought back to her first encounter with Prince Castien, recalling his dismissive remarks. His face had looked hollow and fatigued, but he'd studied her with eyes like a hawk's.

That was hardly the image her starry-eyed cousin wanted to hear.

"He was polite," Kallessa replied slowly, attempting to conjure an image of a charming prince for Dovina's benefit. The real prince had barely met even the minimum requirements for courtesy.

"And quite handsome too, with piercing gray eyes," she continued inventively. "He seems very... princely." Kallessa cringed internally at her pathetic attempt at deception, but Dovina's face lit up in rapture.

"Did you get a chance to tell him about your split skirt idea?"

Now why would Dovina care about that? Surely her cousin hadn't suddenly taken an interest in her wellbeing. "Yes, he agreed to see me tomorrow morning."

"You must take me with you," Dovina's grip tighten on her wrist, pain shooting through her arm.

"Ow," Kallessa yelped, wrenching free from Dovina's vice-like clutch.

Dovina's rose perfume enveloped them as she leaned closer. "You don't understand, cousin. I have to meet the prince."

Ah, now there was the cousin Kallessa knew. Of course, there was an ulterior motive.

“Why?”

“Because I wrote a song for him.” Dovina’s hands clasped together, eyes gleaming.

Kallessa raised her eyebrows. “And?” she asked.

Dovina had an intense, scheming look on her face that Kallessa recognized all too well. “He’s looking for a wife, remember? And I hear he is a great lover of music.”

Kallessa suppressed a sigh. The prince hadn’t looked like he was searching for a wife when she’d seen him earlier. In fact, he’d appeared to be actively avoiding it. There was no use in explaining that to Dovina, though.

“Of course I’ll take you with me.” Kallessa finally relented, with a small shake of her head.

“Now tell me,” Dovina pressed, “who are you engaged to, and how did it happen?”

One lie…

Kallessa knew she was going to pay for this. Never in her life had she tried to live a lie, even for a moment. She hated the fake politeness, the forced smiles, and the secretive rumors of the court, but now she was willingly adopting that persona. She wasn’t even a good liar.

Kallessa’s heart raced, palms growing sweaty. “Just a shipbuilder’s son. I guess it was sort of love at first sight.” She stole a quick glance at Dovina, expecting scorn or disbelief in her cousin’s face. Instead she saw, what-hope?

“Well, how did you meet? Did you know he was going to be here?” She paused. “No, wait, you wouldn’t have. You must have met last night. What’s his name? Did he kiss you?”

Heat crept up Kallessa’s neck as she remembered Nevander kissing her hand behind the curtains. Had that only been last night? Why had it felt so clandestine?

“His name is Nevander, and yes, we met last night. He kissed my hand.” Well, at least that was technically true.

“How did he propose?” Dovina pressed, her eyes wide.

You are my fiancé.

Kallessa wanted to burst out in nervous laughter at her own audacity. Had she actually done that? Just walked up to a complete stranger and claimed he was her betrothed? It was madness.

As she tried to conjure a romantic proposal, Tynan's face intruded on her thoughts. His poetic words, his promise to ask for her father for her hand again after being refused... then vanishing without a trace.

Suddenly, she wasn't so excited anymore. The prospect of marriage, even a fake one, was only tiresome.

"I'll tell you some other time, cousin. Why don't you tell me about your day?" Kallessa forced a smile, desperate to change the subject away from her disastrous romantic history.

Nevander's muscles ached as he climbed the stairs to Castien's chambers, freshly bathed and dressed in simple linen pants and a comfortable shirt. He found the prince slumped in a chair by the blazing hearth, face drawn and exhausted. Was Queen Lyra pushing him too hard? He wanted to demand that Castien tell him when the last time he'd eaten, or how he was feeling, but he held his tongue.

Their eyes met, and the prince's lips quirked in a half-smile. "So, tell me about your fiancée."

Nevander's heart skipped. "You tell me. She's one of your guests."

Castien steepled his slender fingers, regarding Nevander with shrewd eyes. "Ah yes, the tragic Kallessa. Her story is quite sad. But I don't really think it's fair to tell you her story without giving her a chance to share it herself."

Nevander strode to the window, sweeping back the curtains. The last purplish hues of light faded over the vineyard, night closing in. "Humanity from you? Is the prince turning over a new leaf?"

Castien's laugh was sharp and abrupt. "I love a good story, and I wouldn't want to mess it up by retelling it poorly. I'm sure I could do it no better justice than the lady herself."

Nevander spun on his heels, pacing the length of the prince's spacious chambers. The room suddenly felt stifling. He loosened the top buttons of his shirt with impatient fingers. "What am I supposed to do with her?"

The prince traced a pattern across the upholstered chair with a finger. "Oh, I'm sure you will think of something. She's quite beautiful, after all."

A vision of Kallessa's golden eyes flashing in the afternoon sunlight, her smile that made him ache to taste that happiness, stabbed through Nevander's mind. She was beautiful. And innocent. Not someone to be used, even if she had unknowingly thrust him into this charade. He felt an innate need to protect her, to shield her from harm. But he had to maintain his distance. He was, after all, the prince of Dracia, even if he was masquerading as a pauper.

"You should thank her," Castien said. "You could have been partnered with Lady Tursam."

Yes, Lady Tursam. His shins ached in sympathy for all that displeased the spiteful elderly woman. He stopped pacing, staring at Castien. "Did your mother make these matches?"

"Some of them." Castien's eyes darted around the room. "But I may have glanced over the list myself and made a few... adjustments."

"Why would you put me with Lady Tursam?" The thought of having his ankle tied to the elderly woman for that first race instead of Kallessa's made him cringe.

Castien shrugged. "I find her quite entertaining."

"That's because she wouldn't dare smack the prince with her walking stick," Nevander retorted.

The faint aroma of freshly brewed tea wafted through the air as Castien poured a cup. "There's more to her than meets the eye. She is very loyal to the Ravenbluff family." He raised his cup slightly. "Care for some tea?"

The sight of Castien calmly consuming the steaming drink made Nevander's spine tingle with perspiration. Castien was the only reason he stayed in the sweltering room, and he wasn't about to make himself any hotter by drinking hot tea.

Nevander declined with a shake of his head. "She's loyal, hmm? Interesting that you mention that." He wandered to Castien's cluttered writing desk, lifting a few papers covered in formal script before dropping them back to the desk. "She said something rather revealing to me today. Something about a chilly vintage from two years ago." Nevander kept his tone casual, but his meaning was clear.

Castien made a noncommittal noise as he slowly sipped his tea, his face impassive, though his eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "She doesn't miss much, but I trust her. Did she recognize you?"

"If she did, she kept it to herself. So, is she one of your spies?"

Castien raised his eyebrows in mock innocence. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Castien’s hand trembled as he placed the teacup on its saucer.

Concern gnawed at Nevander. “Why don’t we dine alone this evening, just the two of us? You can catch me up on all the latest court gossip and intrigue.”

Castien’s expression hardened into an icy mask. “I didn’t ask you to come here to babysit me, Van. I’m not an invalid.”

“I know,” Nevander replied. “You’re far too much of an insufferable jerk for anyone to take care of you for long.”

Castien scoffed but motioned to the chair next to him. “Sit your butt down and tell me how your sister is doing.”

Nevander breathed an internal sigh of relief and did as the prince commanded.

Thirteen

THE NEXT MORNING, KALLESSA'S brush snagged on a tangle as an impatient knock rattled her door. Dawn's soft hues barely cracked the horizon, filling her new chambers with pale light. Another knock sent tremors through the glass vase of irises on the dressing table. With a sigh, she abandoned her half-brushed hair and opened the door.

Dovina swept in, a vision in silver gossamer and glittering beadwork. A delicate leaf coronet adorned her elaborate braids and curls. "Why aren't you ready yet?"

Under her arm, Dovina clutched her travel harp, the lightweight willow wood polished to a sheen. She paced restlessly, the soft tinkling sound of the silver beads in her gown filled the air as she moved.

Sitting back down at the dressing table, Kallessa continued to brush her long dark curls before making parts at the scalp. She intended to keep it simple. She certainly didn't stand a chance in the looks department with her beautiful cousin at her side.

"We aren't meeting with the prince for another hour," Kallessa mumbled around the hairpins she held in her lips, her fingers deftly braiding her hair and twisting it into a neat halo atop of her head.

"You aren't even dressed yet. Did this new room come with a maid?" Dovina's gaze darted around the opulent room, brows furrowing. "You said your fiancé was the son of a shipbuilder. Why are these rooms so… lavish?"

Kallessa's stomach knotted. She'd wondered the same thing. Ornate tapestries, plush rugs, gilded mirrors, and a crystal chandelier screamed

wealth beyond a mere shipbuilder.

"I'm not sure." When she'd first entered the opulent chambers the previous evening, she'd been shocked, convinced that the maid had escorted her to the wrong room. However, the maid assured her that this was where she was supposed to stay for the rest of the festival.

"Must be really good business," Dovina murmured, her brows furrowing slightly.

Her cousin strode to the bed, eyeing the peach dress Kallessa had laid out. "No, no, no. You can't wear this one." Dovina yanked the gown up. "Can't you see I'm wearing silver?"

"And I was supposed to read your mind this morning?"

Dovina's perfectly arched eyebrow suggested yes, she was. She rummaged through the wardrobe, swishing dresses aside one by one, mumbling to herself. "I didn't know we'd be presented to the prince together. I should have had more dresses made." Dovina whipped out a simple off-white satin gown, the smoothness of the fabric catching the light. "Wear this one, with the silver shoes and silver necklace. That way, we won't clash."

And Kallessa wouldn't stand out against her. That was fine. She just needed Prince Castien to listen to her idea. Then he could flirt with Dovina to his heart's content.

Dovina fussed and Kallessa dressed, and soon enough it was time to go. Kallessa grabbed her box with her split skirt and Dovina, her harp. A footman escorted them to their destination, their footsteps echoing as they navigated the unfamiliar halls. Where would they be presented? Would it be in a grand courtroom or a throne room?

Her heart pounded as they stopped at... a sunroom?

Inside, Prince Castien reclined by the window, dawn's cool light reflecting off his pensive features. His slender fingers curled around an earthenware mug, wispy tendrils of steam rising hypnotically from its murky surface. Silvery mists danced on the lawn beyond the expansive windows, cool and clean in the early dawn.

But the stuffy room reeked of pungent flowers, making Kallessa's head spin. The crackling fire in the brazier in the corner intensified the temperature. Sweat beaded on her brow as her gaze swept over shelves lined with blood-red and orange blooms.

“The ladies Dovina Wynlar and Kallessa Dahoko, my lord,” the footman announced.

The prince waved lazily. “Yes, thank you. You may go.”

The footman clapped his heels and retreated, leaving Kallessa and Dovina standing near the doorway, glancing at each other nervously. According to protocol, they couldn’t speak until he acknowledged them. Yet he continued to stare at the distant horizon. Kallessa felt Dovina’s nervous energy radiating beside her. Her own muscles ached from standing so still.

Moments ticked by, the prince sipping from his mug, Kallessa resisting the urge to squirm. Finally, those eerie gray eyes shifted to them. Caught in the hazy morning light, they were translucent, like wisps of smoke. He pointed to the embroidered seats across from him and uttered a simple command, “Sit.”

Kallessa sank into the seat, relief warring with mounting tension. A delicate tea service of silver and porcelain sat on the table between them, accompanied by a platter of buttery scones, lemon curd, and tiny persimmon tarts dusted with sugar. The prince’s plate sat untouched. A bead of nervous sweat trickled between Kallessa’s breasts as they sat waiting, her mind filled with questions.

Finally, the prince broke the silence, his mild voice a contrast to the mood of the sunroom. “Tea? I’ve dismissed the maid, so if you would like, you can pour it yourself.”

Drinking anything hot sounded awful, but Kallessa’s throat had gone so dry, she would need some just so she could speak without croaking.

“I’ll do it,” Dovina murmured softly. With the graceful movements of long practice, she expertly arranged the cups on their saucers, then lifted the ornate teapot. She poured a rich, dark red tea into the exquisite china, the fragrant steam rising. With precision, she added a touch of milk and sugar to both cups, swiftly stirring them. Kallessa couldn’t help but admire Dovina’s composed demeanor, as she skillfully hid her own nerves.

Prince Castien’s gaze drifted back to the window, his eyes devoid of emotion. Kallessa followed his line of sight, her eyes resting on a distant vineyard. The vines were now barren of their ripe grapes, harvested earlier in the fall, with only the mottled gold leaves of autumn still clinging to the twisted branches.

“I hear the beaches of Teansong are breathtaking at sunrise,” he finally said, his voice a soft baritone in the quiet room.

Gone was the teasing man from yesterday's games. The lightness and humor were gone from his face, replaced by a melancholy stillness. He seemed adrift, like the mists floating across the valley.

Dovina, oblivious to his mood, chirped, "Indeed, my lord, but none can compare to the splendor of a sunrise on your estate."

His eyelids fluttered as he gazed across the valley. "I've seen too many of these already." His voice was low, bleak.

As the sun's first rays stretched across the valley, the prince resolutely turned his back on the dawn. His shoulders straightened, and the morning mist faded from his eyes, replaced by the steely gray of granite.

Nevander didn't feel the soft sheets beneath him, nor the pillowy comfort of the blanket that rested upon him. Instead, he gasped for air, a suffocating weight on his chest. Death bore down on him, his comrades in arms accusing him with hollow, lifeless eyes. He wrenched his eyes open, the vaulted ceiling of his luxurious chambers a stark contrast to the harrowing scenes in his mind. Tears he refused to acknowledge dampened his lashes.

He'd wasted the past two years trying to drown out these feelings. Once his shoulder had healed, he'd plowed through any woman that would let him, desperate to feel anything other than the darkness that ate at him. He'd drank any spirit put in his hand, seeking oblivion at the bottom of a bottle. He'd said no to himself and yes to every distraction, be it good or bad, that came his way. Anything to avoid facing the demons that plagued his soul. But they were here now, surrounding him, condemning him for his failures.

He twisted in the blankets, tossing the down pillow on the floor. His men lay in beds of dirt, never to wake again, while he carried on this ridiculous charade of engagement to an intriguing woman in the next suite.

Untangling his legs from the sheets, he stalked to the window and flung it open. The cool air hit his bare chest as he inhaled deeply, trying to calm the angry, ugly thing vibrating just below the surface of his mind. Some days he fought it, some days he was too damn tired.

Splashing cold water on his face, Nevander dressed quickly in a simple white linen shirt, soft wool breeches, and well-worn leather boots. He ran a

hand through his damp hair, avoiding his reflection in the mirror. Too many ghosts swam in those green eyes.

The halls were silent as he made his way to the stables. Dawn broke over the eastern horizon, painting the sky in peaches and roses. A low mist swirled at his ankles, clinging to the last moments of night.

Sunu nickered a greeting as he entered. Akeela played with a strip of leather at his feet while he groomed the horse, forcing his thoughts to stay present. The silky mane beneath his fingers, the sweet scent of hay, the soft shuffling noises of the barn—these were real, tangible things to anchor him.

He swung a saddle over Sunu's back, settling it gently into place before fastening each strap. Methodically, he checked each buckle, ensuring all was secure. When he turned toward the barn entrance, the sudden appearance of the queen made his jaw clench.

Just as he'd finally started to relax into his familiar morning routine, she appeared like a specter, disrupting his fragile peace. Queen Lyra strode to him, her silver hair unbound over a loose dark gown of forest green. Her piercing eyes studied him in the pale morning light.

He forced a courtly smile to his face and greeted her.

"You must forget the household I married into, Van," the queen said, a half smile gracing her face.

"Pardon?"

"In the Ravenbluff clan, deception is the game. You don't have to plaster that smile on for me."

This woman had known him for almost ten years, yet he still didn't feel he could let his guard down. He even schooled his face around his own mother. It was too ingrained in him as a prince of the court.

She raised one perfectly arched eyebrow, her gaze piercing through his carefully constructed facade. "Fine. Keep it to yourself. I can see how well it's working for you."

The smile froze on his face, the corners of his lips twitching with suppressed frustration. He wanted to rage; to ask if she knew what it was like to lose so many people who had relied on him. But she'd lost too.

"I'm sorry, my lady," he replied, his voice strained. "What can I do for you?"

Akeela padded up to the queen, purring softly. Lyra scooped up the cat, her delicate fingers stroking its fur. "Is this one from Wynna's litter?" she asked, a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

“Yes,” Nevander replied, his voice softening. “She thought I needed watching after.”

The queen chuckled softly. “I miss that little one. How is she doing? And Ciana? I’ve been surrounded by men since those two left.”

He busied himself with hanging up the grooming tools. “Wynna is growing tall and coming out of her shell. As for Ciana, well, she’s a true Lionskye. Good at being pushy, and she’s mastered the art of hiding her feelings like the rest of us.”

“She’s a Ravenbluff, and her place is here,” Queen Lyra stated firmly.

Nevander clenched his jaw. After Dane’s death, Ciana had packed her things and come back home to Lionskye estate, with Wynna. He wanted to argue that blood would always be thicker, that Ciana would always be a Lionskye in her heart, but he bit his tongue.

The queen rubbed her temples. “But that’s not why I caught you.” Her eyes, so like Castien’s, held a rare vulnerability. “What can you tell me about Castien? Has he shared anything? Dane’s death was hard on us all, but I’m worried about him. According to the healer, he should be much further along in his recovery.”

Nevander’s chest tightened. What could he say? Castien was as tight-lipped as ever, his defenses stronger than before.

“I don’t know, my lady,” he admitted.

Lyra glanced down at Akeela, cradled in her arms, stroking the cat’s neck. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “He doesn’t eat, he hardly sleeps. He won’t talk about Dane. He won’t talk about the throne. Graynor doesn’t even try to talk to him about it. He keeps telling me to give Castien time.” Lyra swallowed hard. “How much time? Do I have to watch both sons die?” She shook her head, her jaw set. “No, that’s not going to happen. You two were thick as thieves before. I need you to talk some sense into him.”

It wouldn’t work. No man liked to be manipulated, especially Castien. He would rebel for the sake of rebelling.

“I will be his friend, my lady, as I’ve always been.”

Lyra’s shoulders slumped. “If he would just talk about it…”

He shouldn’t betray Castien’s trust, but he had to tell her something. He couldn’t stand to see that look of loss in anyone’s eyes, especially those he cared about.

“He still believes the poisoner is at large,” Nevander admitted.

Her eyes snapped to his. “But the Zhakrova family was murdered. Every clue led to them. Graynor had men on it for months.”

She was wrong. One Zhakrova still lived—Shaydn, who had saved Castien’s life. But to that, he was sworn to secrecy.

“That’s all I know, my lady.”

“Do you think there’s any truth to his suspicions?”

“I haven’t found any evidence of it.”

The queen grew silent, her hand resting motionless upon Akeela’s back. Then, in a flat, chilling voice, she spoke, “If I ever find out the poisoner still lives, I’ll shred him apart with my own bare hands.”

She lowered Akeela to the ground. “Tell Ciana to visit soon. I miss her.” Without another word, she left.

Nevander finished saddling Sunu and rode out as the first rays of sunlight crept through the stable. He pushed the horse into a gallop, wind whipping his hair and stinging his face. Faster and faster they went, the countryside blurring past in a wash of gold and brown. Yet no matter how fast he rode, he couldn’t escape himself. His thoughts chased close behind, nipping at his heels like wolves on the hunt.

Fourteen

PRINCE CASTIEN'S STEELY GAZE pierced Kallessa for a heartbeat before shifting to her cousin.

"Lady Dovina," Prince Castien addressed her.

Dovina straightened, her small harp beside her, a practiced smile on her lips. "Yes, my lord?"

"I don't believe I invited you to this meeting this morning," he said so flippantly, it was as if he was discussing the weather. Kallessa's stomach clenched.

Dovina's lips formed a shocked "O". No, she'd obviously never been spoken to like that. But Kallessa knew her younger cousin. She would rally, she always did.

Dovina blinked a few times before continuing. "Ah, yes. That is true, my lord. I invited myself." She smiled demurely, tilting her head. The silver in her coronet caught a ray of light.

Prince Castien actually chuckled. "And why is that?"

"I hear my lord is a great lover of music," Dovina replied, dropping her gaze and fluttering her lashes. She was good, Kallessa had to admit. Kallessa wasn't sure if she could ever pull off that look.

"That may be so." The prince leaned back, steepling his fingers.

"I wrote a song for you, my lord. Would you like to hear it?"

He glanced at the wall behind their heads. "I have precisely fifteen minutes left before my morning schedule begins. You may have five of them."

Without hesitation, Dovina took her harp and braced it in her lap. Her slim fingers plucked and strummed a complicated melody that Kallessa couldn't begin to follow. It was beautiful. Dovina hummed softly as she played, her eyes closing as she got lost in the music. As the melody drew to a close, Dovina opened her eyes, casting a shy glance at the prince.

His eyes were unreadable, granite walls fully intact. Yet the spell cast by Dovina's ethereal melody still hung in the air. Why hadn't Dovina ever told her how well she played? Kallessa's respect for her young cousin grew, albeit begrudgingly.

The prince inhaled, breaking the atmosphere.

"The high 'G' is slightly sharp. Besides that, it has merit. You may go, lady Dovina."

The remaining glow of the music popped at his words. Kallessa glanced at Dovina, whose cheeks bloomed bright pink.

Rising with only a slight tremor in her hand, Dovina murmured, "Thank you, my lord. I shall work on that." Then she slipped past Kallessa and left the room.

The silent void left by her passing was only broken by a coal shifting in the brazier. Sunlight bathed the greenhouse in warm hues, the air suffocatingly hot. Kallessa craved the cool air she knew lied only on the other side of this glass room. The mists were almost gone in the yards, revealing gardeners along the paths, trimming and shaping the shrubs and flowers.

"You have eight minutes, my lady," the prince spoke, his voice soft once again. The empty earthenware mug sat on the table now beside the empty plate. Color flushed his cheeks, and he looked less pale than when they had entered.

Kallessa's heart raced. This had been a terrible idea. The way he'd just dismissed Dovina made it obvious he couldn't care less about whatever she was about to present. Why had he even agreed to this meeting?

But she was here now, before a prince. She wasn't about to lose her chance to get out from under her uncle's thumb.

"May I stand?" At his nod, she retrieved the box beneath her chair and shook out the skirts.

She draped them across her palm to display them. "These are made for a lady to ride in the saddle as a man does, for stability, endurance, and sport."

"What is wrong with a carriage?" Castien interjected dismissively.

Everything. If it weren't for a carriage, she wouldn't be here, alone in the world, before a foreign prince who looked at her like she was a ninny.

"Nothing, my lord. But ladies may wish to-"

"Its ridiculous. What lady would want to straddle a horse?"

She would. The freedom to maneuver, to make daring jumps, to feel the strength and stride of the beast underneath her. It was exhilarating.

"It's quite modest, my lord," Kallessa persisted, splaying the skirts. "See, the topmost layers are extra full to cover the split skirts below. It's comfortable and has large pockets."

Prince Castien glanced at the clock. "What is it you expect to gain from this meeting?"

Her stomach twisted. "I- I was looking for an investor, or perhaps to sell my idea."

The prince's eyes narrowed. "Why do you need money? You fiancé doesn't look to be in dire straights."

Ugh, no. That was an excellent question. How could she answer without revealing her farce with Nevander?

"Ah, he loves my idea, and thinks a lady being independent is commendable," she stammered.

"And why did he not approach me with this idea?"

Because he's fake! She wanted to shout, but instead she mustered all the composure she had left and replied, "Like I said, he admires my independence and lets me make my own decisions."

The oppressive heat made her lightheaded as the prince studied her.

Finally, he spoke. "I think these split skirts are a terrible idea. I'm not interested."

Kallessa saw sparks at the edge of her vision. She was going back to Aunt Gevene bereft of hope, destined for poverty. In a year, she'd be living in a shack on the beach, or begging in the streets of Teansong. If only she really was engaged. But who would want to marry her if they knew she was destitute?

She began folding the skirt, swallowing back tears. No way would she cry in front of this heartless man. He didn't deserve to see her vulnerability.

She cleared her throat, focusing on folding the pleats. "Thank you for your time, my lord."

But just as she was about to ask permission to leave, his voice stopped her in her tracks. "Wait," he commanded.

She raised her eyed. “Yes, my lord?”

“How much do you know about the Dracian court?” He rose and strode to the brazier before stirring the flaming coals within.

Kallessa paused, caught off guard by his question. “Not a lot, my lord. I’ve been out of the social circles for some time.”

“Princess Ciana Lionskye of Dracia was once married to my brother Dane.”

Yes. His brother who’d died under mysterious circumstances.

His lips tightened. “She’ll be visiting next week, a few days before the end of the festival. She is a great lover of horses and riding. I will tell her of your ridiculous split skirt idea.”

Hope bubbled up in Kallessa’s chest. “Oh, thank you, my lord.”

He raised his hand. “On one condition.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Condition?”

“You and Nevander must complete the Axan Moon Festival treasure hunt together. And win.”

Kallessa’s gentle knock on Dovina’s door echoed in the quiet hallway. No answer. Relief washed over her as she made her way back to her rooms in the east wing, her slippers whispering against the stone floors.

Poor Dovina. If Kallessa had been so humiliated, she’d have hidden under her bed until the festival ended.

Her dress clung damply to her overheated body. The fabric felt suffocating, like a second skin she desperately wanted to rip off. She found a dress hook and yanked the ties undone, unlacing and removing it in record time. The cool morning air brushing against her arms and legs felt glorious.

A door slammed next to hers with a startling clap, making her jump. Nevander. She hadn’t glimpsed him since moving into these rooms. Did he resent her for putting him in this impossible situation? For forcing him to lie to the crown prince?

Guilt gnawed at her. How did she get herself into this mess? But… if things went well, she could release him from this charade.

All they had to do was win the treasure hunt.

She snatched up the letter containing the first clue and changed into a cotton day dress.

Minutes later, Kallessa stood before Nevander's door, heart pounding like a festival drum. He was still there. She could hear fabric rustling and the soft thuds of boots from inside. Her fingers trembled as she made a fist, yet she couldn't bring herself to knock. Her harsh breath echoed in the hushed quiet of the corridor.

Enough. She just had to knock on his door. If he ignored it, she'd figure something else out. But as she thrust her arm forward, the door swung open unexpectedly, and her fist collided with a hard chest, the firm bulge of muscle beneath fine cloth sending jolts of shock up her arm. She fell back, her skirts tangling like a wave beneath her feet.

Nevander grasped her arm, his touch warm and steady. "Easy there, fiancé," he said, his voice a smooth timbre.

"Thank you." She looked up, caught by the dance of lamplight on flecks of amber and silver in his vivid green eyes. Yet this morning, an impenetrable emerald wall hid his thoughts. His face, so open yesterday, seemed reserved, a subtle tension in the lines around his mouth.

His tawny hair, damp from a recent grooming, fell softly away from his brow. A subtle blend of clove and cedar emanated from him like the earthy embrace of a forest at dawn. His neatly trimmed beard added ruggedness to his polished appearance.

He looked so put together, yet something about him was still untamed, a magnetic aura of wildness radiated from him. And something inside her thrummed in response. Something she squashed down immediately.

Glancing down, she noticed her fallen letter. Before she could retrieve it, he swiftly picked it up, grouping it with the one he held.

"May I escort you somewhere?" He slid his hand to her elbow.

Even though they were in the cool hallway, she felt as if she were back in that overheated sunroom, her skin flushing. "Are you ready for the treasure hunt today?"

"I'm not entirely sure I'm going to participate," he replied. His voice sounded distant, distracted.

Hadn't he insisted on playing yesterday? Of course, he'd had overnight to reflect on the folly of this charade she'd forced him into. But she couldn't give up. Prince Castien was giving her a chance, and that was more than she'd been given in years.

Swallowing, she touched his hand, feeling the subtle twitch of muscles beneath her palm. “It will be fun, and we can get to know each other.”

“I thought you didn’t want to play the games,” Nevander said, his eyebrows drawing together. He looked conflicted, as if battling an internal struggle.

She hadn’t, but she didn’t want to be homeless either. What if she told him what the prince had said? But it would seem so vain, like she was using him to win. Well, she was, wasn’t she?

“I changed my mind,” she lied, forcing conviction into her words.

He gazed down at her, searching her face. “Kallessa, you know this is not real.”

Her cheeks burned. Ugh, she was a terrible person.

“Of course it isn’t. I just want to play, that’s all.” She glanced down the hallway, dropping her hand. “We don’t have to get to know each other if you don’t want, but let’s at least play the games. What other boring things are there to do around here, anyway?” What a laugh. She could think of countless things she rather be doing than these ridiculous games.

Nevander’s gaze dropped to her lips. “I could think of other things to do.”

Kallessa couldn’t help but stare back, her skin tingling with awareness. *Rough hands on her waist, hot breath in her ear…* She blinked, desperately trying to refocus on the present. *Stay on task Kallessa, do not stare at those kissable lips.*

Then, he broke the gaze, a smooth smile transforming his face. All hints of the intensity she saw moments ago were gone.

He handed her letter back to her. “Have you opened the first clue yet?”

Kallessa automatically took the outstretched envelope, her mind still trying to catch up with his question. “Um, no. I’m a bit nervous about the whole thing. I’m not very good at puzzles.”

Nevander took her arm, sliding his palm to her elbow, leaving goosebumps in its wake. “I’ve been here a few times before, so that should give us an advantage. Let’s eat breakfast and uncover today’s mysteries.”

In the dining hall, well-dressed people milled about, sipping tea and chatting. Her stomach growled at the rich aromas of pastries, spiced meats, and sweetened fruits. If she didn’t slow down, she wouldn’t fit in her gowns by week’s end.

Nevander released her arm and went straight for the buffet while Kallessa poured tea, now cool enough to enjoy it, and took a small plate of

persimmon tarts and scones. Heads turned their way, eyes alight with intrigue.

Nevander met the onlookers' gazes, his expression smooth as a windless lake. How did he do that? Her mother's voice echoed, *Your heart shines through your eyes, sweetheart. You can't hide what you truly feel.* What was wrong with that? Shouldn't a person express their feelings?

Kallessa resisted the urge to fidget, focusing instead on the sweet aroma of persimmon tarts mingling with the bergamot of her tea. She swallowed hard. In this world of masks, perhaps some emotions were best concealed.

With a tilt of his head, Nevander's suggestion came soft yet clear. "I mentioned I'm familiar with this estate. Shall we enjoy our breakfast in a more secluded spot?"

"I'd love that." Away from the scrutinizing eyes of society? *Please.*

Outside, birdsong and rustling leaves greeted them. The clean scent of oak trees and sunflowers wafted through the garden. Not the salty ocean, but charming in its own way.

"Around here," Nevander motioned and turned a sharp right onto a gravel path that crunched underfoot. It led to a bench under an ivy-covered arbor. They weren't far from the formal gardens, but tucked in a nook shielded by ornamental grasses that swayed in the morning air. Private, yet open.

They sat, his thigh next to her skirts. Nevander dove into his meal. "I hope you don't mind. I'm starving."

Kallessa smiled and shook her head.

"Did you meet with the prince this morning?" he asked between bites.

She glanced across the garden, so soft and peaceful in the midmorning light. It was such a contrast to the prince, his chilly eyes gazing out the sweltering sunroom windows. "Yes," she murmured.

"How did it go?" His eyes fixed on her.

Horrible. He'd insulted Dovina and dismissed her like yesterday's leftovers. Yet he'd given her a tiny morsel of hope. "The prince is a very intense man. Have you ever been to the sunroom?"

"I have," he said with a subtle twitch of one eyebrow.

"The heat was unbearable. I'm not certain I left the best impression," Kallessa confessed, sipping her tea.

Nevander wiped his mouth. "How did the prince look? Did he look ill?"

He'd looked more miserable than anything, his gloom like a shadow draped over his chair. "More distracted and perturbed than sick." Kallessa

laughed just a little. “I felt like I was inconveniencing him for merely existing.”

Nevander’s lips quirked. “Yes,” he mused, “he has that effect on people. Did he like your idea?”

No, the prince hated it. Thought it was absurd. Thought *she* was absurd. Then he’d forced her into this game with Nevander.

“Ah, no. But he promised to tell someone else who might be interested.” If she completed this treasure hunt. Although meeting a princess from her own country who loved horses actually sounded exciting.

“The prince will be true to his word,” Nevander assured her. “He may be prickly, but his word is his bond. I hope something comes through for you, Kallessa.” His voice had dropped into that velvety baritone that felt like silk on her skin. Did he even know he did that to her?

She swallowed hard, her gaze drifting out across the vibrant gardens. “Thank you.”

Silence hung between them as Nevander ate. What was he thinking? His eyes held a distance all morning, as if only partly there. Suddenly, she didn’t feel so hungry anymore.

“I’m sorry about this whole affair. You don’t know me, and there’s no reason you should want to spend your time like this.” Yet, if she was honest, part of her was dying to discover more about him. He seemed both refined and rough, his polite mask barely covering something else. Kallessa wanted to let him off the hook, tell him to forget this silly hunt, but she couldn’t make herself say the words. And she knew his manners wouldn’t allow him to refuse her. At least the court was good for something.

Fifteen

NEVANDER FOUND HIMSELF CAPTIVATED by Kallessa's honey-colored eyes, watching every flicker of emotion dance across her face. She was a poor liar, obviously hiding something. If he were a betting man, he'd wager his father's best ship that Castien was behind this, somehow.

Kallessa's gaze silently pleaded with him not to leave, even as her words insisted otherwise. He'd been harsh at times in the past, his voice carrying the coldness of clashing steel, his decisions as brutal as biting winter winds. But those eyes—how could he deny their warmth, like the first embrace of sunrise after the darkest night?

Logically, there was no reason to spend time with her, but against his better judgment, he found himself drawn to her presence. He didn't have to constantly watch his words, fearing they would be twisted against him. With her, he was just a man, not a name, not a title.

Nevander's jaw tightened as he considered the next two weeks at Ravenbluff Estate. True, he'd be there to help Castien, but a traitorous part of him couldn't help but feel a spark of anticipation. The chance to spend time with Kallessa, even under false pretenses, was a temptation he struggled to resist.

He drank his cooling tea, the bergamot aroma mingling with Kallessa's fresh garden scent. The morning ride had failed to soothe his nerves, but Kallessa's presence brought a sense of calm he hadn't felt in ages.

"I disagree. We could learn about each other." At least the version of him he could present. "Then we wouldn't be strangers any longer. In fact, how

about we play a game of questions before the hunt begins?"

Trepidation filled her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"It's simple. I ask you a question, you answer, then you ask me one. Let's say two questions each today. If we keep that up, by the end of the week, we'll know more about each other than most married couples of thirty years."

"Not my parents," she murmured, her gaze distant. "They were inseparable. Where my father ended is where my mother began. They completed each other in a way I don't think could be compared."

An arrow shot through him at her words. A marriage of love, not duty.

Her hands toyed with her skirts. "But I don't want to talk about that, please. It'll give you a sour stomach after all those scones you ate."

No, he didn't want to talk of such things either. Things that were out of his reach.

But she was a mystery, her past hidden. And against his will, his curiosity deepened. If she didn't want to talk, that was fine. He'd discover her secrets in other ways.

"I beg your pardon. The questions can wait." He withdrew his envelope from his jacket pocket and opened it, the soft rustle of paper filling the air. She leaned toward him as he read the first clue aloud.

I gaze into the ebony night
To bring her stars close to sight,
All seven sails of Enkin's Ship,
I can touch through infinite light.
I'll show you the secrets of Axan's moon
With a twist and a spin, the dark light as noon
The universe is yours to conquer tonight,
What am I, the stargazer's delight?

"Hmm, the stars," Kallessa mumbled, her breath soft, sending prickles of awareness across his skin. "Do you know how many clues there are?" Kallessa sat back and pulled a folded paper from her pocket. He found himself resenting the cool air that was left in her wake.

She unfolded the paper, the yellowing parchment looking strangely familiar to him. "This map is terribly inaccurate," Kallessa murmured, pressing the sheet flat against the breeze. "There's much more to the estate than is depicted." She pointed to the left side of the estate walls, covered in ivy. "See here? The estate doesn't end there."

Nevander stared at the map. “Where did you get that?”

“This map? It was in our room when we arrived. Didn’t you get one?”

No, he hadn’t. Not that it mattered. He didn’t need a map. But the one Kallessa held in her hands was a map Nevander had drawn himself years ago as a gift for his niece, Wynna.

When he’d painstakingly crafted the map of the sprawling Ravenbluff grounds, Nevander had intentionally left out certain details and areas, leaving mysteries for Wynna to discover as she explored. He’d spent hours inking each line, picturing the joy on his niece’s face as she ventured forth with the map clutched in her small hands. The image brought a wistful smile to his lips even now.

Seeing Kallessa hold his creation stirred conflicting emotions.

He cleared his throat. “You’re right. There’s more to this estate than meets the eye. I heard rumors there are even underground passageways.”

Her eyes lit up. “Ooh, really? Do you think we could find them?”

Nevander chuckled. “I’m sure they aren’t on the map.” No, they were definitely not on the map, since he’d only become aware of them that week himself.

“They might be.” Kallessa glanced up at him, a spark of curiosity flickering in her gaze. “Did you spot the tiny woodpecker in the oak tree?” She pointed to the oak he’d drawn the year a family of woodpeckers lived in the hole. He and Wynna had watched them all summer, seeing the little ones poke their heads out and cheep madly when their mother showed up with a worm in her beak.

That his true identity remained cloaked beneath layers of half-truths chafed at him. How could he explain to her he’d drawn the map? That there was more hiding that she hadn’t found yet? But he couldn’t without explaining entirely too much about his past.

“Let’s try to figure out the first clue,” Nevander suggested, redirecting the conversation.

Kallessa laughed lightly, straightening. “Oh yes, of course. I’m getting distracted.”

“Are you familiar with constellations?” he asked.

“Do you mean the stars?” Kallessa glanced up at the brilliant azure sky. The first warm breezes filtered through the garden, stirring strands of hair around her face.

Nevander nodded, fighting the urge to tuck those wayward strands behind her ear.

“Somewhat. In summers, when I was young, my mother and I would lie on the beach, watching the sun set and the stars appear. We’d make up stories for the brightest ones. But I don’t know their proper names.”

Nevander took the clue, the paper crinkling beneath his touch. “Enkin’s Ship is a constellation in the northern sky,” he explained, pointing to the third line.

Kallessa’s forehead creased as she reread the riddle. “So, do you think the clue is outside somewhere?”

Nevander paused, considering. “No. I know a room that might have what we’re looking for.”

Nevander led Kallessa past the grand staircases, the scent of polished wood and lemon oil lingering in the air. Laughter and conversation faded, replaced by an echoing quiet as their feet sounded across the stone floors.

Kallessa’s heart quickened as they approached the hidden back half of the estate. Had it only been mere days ago since they’d arrived? Time seemed to blur in this enchanted place.

Nevander’s warm, firm hand grasped hers, tugging her through a set of double doors. Kallessa pulled back, bringing them to a halt.

“Are we supposed to be here?” she whispered.

“It’s fine,” Nevander assured her, his voice low and certain. “This is the quickest way to the room with the next clue. There’s always a back way to everything in a well-designed house.”

Kallessa’s gaze swept the corridor. Lush carpet muffled their footsteps, a stark contrast to the echoing marble halls. Colorful tapestries adorned the walls, depicting gardens and rolling hills. One caught her eye–a herd of horses thundering across a plain, the stitching so fine she could almost hear their hooves pounding.

Mahogany tables gleamed dimly, their surfaces adorned with casual flower arrangements. Two upholstered chairs with worn velvet seats sat

beside a window, a few well-thumbed books stacked on the wide windowsill.

It looked lived in. Homey.

“This is more of the residential part,” Nevander explained. “The front is for guests.”

“That explains the map,” Kallessa murmured, her gaze still flitting around the ornate space.

“Maybe,” Nevander agreed, his voice tinged with intrigue. “Come on, it should be down this hallway.”

They reached a door tucked in a dimly lit corner, seamlessly blending with the dark wainscoting. Nevander’s hand slid under the ornate bronze knob, twisting and tugging. The door swung open with a yawning creak, revealing a granite spiral staircase winding upward into darkness.

“After you,” Nevander gestured, a quirky half-smile playing on his lips.

Kallessa hesitated. She couldn’t see a thing. When was the last time this door had even been opened? Her imagination conjured images of spiders scuttling in unseen corners, snakes coiled in shadowed recesses. Well, if he felt so amusingly confident about that creepy passageway, he could go first. “Oh, no. You go ahead. You seem to know this place so well.”

Nevander stepped forward, one hand held out in front of him as if parting the inky blackness, the other hand drawing Kallessa behind him. She shivered as the cool air of the unused passage enveloped them.

After they crossed the threshold, the door swung shut behind them with a definitive thud, plunging them into darkness. Kallessa’s yelp of surprise coincided with Nevander’s quick intake of breath. She couldn’t see anything except a faint sliver of light coming from the under the door.

Nevander’s voice was close, a troubled whisper trailing through the quiet room. “I forgot about that.”

“Forgot?” Kallessa heard her own voice raising an octave. “How many times have you been here?”

Silence stretched between them before Nevander responded evasively, “Ah, I should have known. That door did seem suspicious.”

Kallessa’s fingers fumbled across the wooden paneling until they wrapped around the large brass knob. “Its locked.”

Nevander muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a curse involving the prince’s name.

His swallow sounded deafening in the intense silence of the stone stairwell. “Well, it seems our only option is up,” he said, his optimism sounding brittle in the enclosed space. “Perhaps there’s a key up there.”

“Up where?” Kallessa strained to see anything in the impenetrable darkness. “What’s even up there?”

Nevander grasped her arm, the warmth of his palm seeping through the thin fabric of her sleeve. As his fingers slid down to envelop her own, she felt her heart flutter in her chest. But that was only from anxiety. It had nothing to do with the way he kept touching her, his hands leaving trails of fire on her skin. Definitely not because of the way his green eyes smoldered when they met her own, or how his rare smiles made her stomach flip. Her heart didn’t actually flutter every time he was near. She was simply nervous about being alone with him in the dark stairwell, that was all.

“Come on, let’s get to the top. It’s not far.” He pulled her to the steps and placed her palm on the smooth railing.

She had no choice but to climb, lifting her skirts with one hand and keeping the other firmly gripped on the railing. Thankfully, she didn’t run into a single spiderweb, and the musty dampness of an unused corridor was completely absent. In fact, the space smelled airy, with only the faintest scent of stone and earth.

Step by step, they ascended, the rhythmic sound of their footfalls echoing in the enclosed space until she bumped her head against the ceiling. “Ow,” she exclaimed, rubbing the sore spot where her hairpins pricked her skin.

Nevander joined her on the narrow step, his head also hitting the ceiling with a soft thud. “Right beside you,” he reassured her, his breathing uneven. He cleared his throat, fingers scraping across the unseen barrier. “It’s here somewhere.”

He was quietly taking deep measured breaths in through his nose and out through his mouth as he searched for something neither of them could see. Was he claustrophobic? Kallessa would never ask, she didn’t know him well enough to. And pointing it out would only make him uncomfortable. She had to admit, she didn’t feel very calm squeezed into the tight dark space either.

“This is much easier when one can see,” Nevander said, voice strained. “Hang on... I think I’ve found it.”

Metal scraped against metal, followed by a protesting groan as the door opened on the roof above them. Glorious morning light flooded the

stairwell. Kallessa gulped it in, almost crying with relief as she rushed onto the landing.

And then she stopped, only one word escaping her lips. “Wow.”

“Welcome to the Ravenbluff observatory,” Nevander said as he ascended into the room behind her, his voice carrying a note of shared relief.

It was the most enchanting room Kallessa had ever seen. Golden walls and floor shimmered, bathing the room in a soft glow. The air held the fresh scent of paper and a faint trace of metal.

Two stories of jewel-toned windows encircled the observatory, pouring stained light across the space. The dance of color played upon their skin like the brushstrokes of an unseen artist.

Engraved archways sectioned off enclaves with tables covered in globes, scrolls, and maps. And in the room’s heart stood a massive object shrouded in a heavy cloth, its colossal size reaching towards a domed ceiling adorned with a painted sky.

Nevander approached it, a playful glint in his eyes as he gestured towards the monumental figure. “I believe this is what we’re looking for.”

Nevander’s heart racing had nothing to do with the quick climb up the stairs, nothing to do with that enclosed darkness that shot a needle of fear through him. And everything to do with the beautiful woman before him. Kallessa’s eyes gleamed as she twirled around the room, her delicate fingers brushing every surface. This was worth it. The panic that had gripped him moments before vanished.

The observatory’s domed roof sheltered them within a kaleidoscope of light. Stained glass fractured daylight into jewel-toned fragments, bathing Kallessa in a dance of color. Crimson, azure, and emerald hues flickered across her flushed cheeks, kissed her dark hair with fiery sparks, and etched patterns upon her shoulders. It was as if he’d been living in monochrome, and this woman had brought color back into his world. His skin hummed to close the distance, wanting to be part of her simple joy of discovery. A treasure hunt, indeed.

She stopped, sensing his nearness. Her dark eyes were glossy with undiluted delight. Had his eyes ever looked like that? Not in a very long time. And he wanted that. He craved that.

Unable to resist any longer, he reached out. His hand glided along her arm, fingers intertwining with hers. “What do you think?” he asked.

“Amazing,” Kallessa breathed, unaware of how her touch ignited him. “I can’t imagine what it’s like at night. Does the roof open?”

“Yes,” he said, picturing the night sky reflected in her eyes. “The ceiling panel rolls back, revealing the entire sky.”

“I want to see it,” she said simply. So did he. He wanted to see the stars reflected in her eyes. Watch the moon rise with her.

Could he possibly suggest what was on his mind? It wasn’t proper, but in two weeks, they would probably never see each other again. He would return to the capital, to his responsibilities. She would find a man who didn’t have nightmares every night, who could take care of her.

But for this fleeting fortnight, why couldn’t they dream together? Why not live a fantasy, if only for a few precious days?

With a gentle tug, he led her to the telescope, their hands intertwined.

“Here lies the answer to our first clue, I believe. Why don’t we inspect it and see if we’re right?”

Nevander pulled the hoist, revealing the focal point of the chamber, tiny dust motes dancing across the sunbeams.

Sure enough, a cream envelope with gold writing fluttered to the ground. But Kallessa ignored it, her gaze ensnared by the device before her. The metallic gleam of the telescope’s polished brass frame caught the sunlight, sending dappled reflections skittering across her awestruck face.

“Do you know how it works?” she asked, voice tinged with wonder. “I’ve never seen one.”

Nevander left the envelope forgotten, his focus solely on Kallessa. “Did you know the moon has little round craters all over its surface?” he asked. “And when it’s full, the edges of the craters emit a radiant glow, as if illuminated from within.” Like her eyes, like her smile.

Intrigued, Kallessa leaned down, her fingertips grazing the smooth eyepiece. “And this will show us that?”

“Yes.”

“Show me?”

Those two simple words held so much trust, so much anticipation. It would be a mistake to meet her in the dark, to gaze at the moon together, but he'd never wanted anything so much in his life.

"Let's get through these silly games and I will unveil the night sky's secrets to you."

Her face was so open, so full of fresh curiosity. "Promise?"

He anchored himself in her gaze, the stormy sea of his dark past retreating under her sunlit eyes. "I promise."

Sixteen

KALLESSA KNEW SHE SHOULD care about the game. She had to win, or she and Aunt Gevene might be destitute. But the warmth of Nevander's hand was impossible to ignore. With him, she felt solid, safe, unafraid to speak her mind. She had no fear of ridicule, unlike Dovina or her uncle. It seemed he actually valued what she said, as if it was important. When was the last time she'd felt valued by anyone?

The spell between them broke as Nevander bent to retrieve the cream envelope from the golden oak floor. "Care to do the honors?" he asked, his voice low.

She slid her finger under the flap and withdrew the embossed card. Golden script danced across the paper:

Well done, my dears, well done indeed.
You've found the eye to the sky, but heed!
Five more clues you've yet to find
Before Axan, the reaper shall relinquish his mind.
I have a spine, but I have no bones.
Many a character has called me home.
My neighbors and I are very close
Because I can't bear to be alone.
But many are we,
And only one need ye find.
I am the key

To what lies behind.
I sit quite close to the fire
If I were alive, I'd surely perspire
My treasures live on in memories of the dead
If you think you can find me,
Your next clue will be read.

Kallessa's mind whirled with possibilities. A spine, but no bones? A home for characters? Could it be—

"A book, perhaps?" she said.

Nevander's warm smile sent a flutter through her chest. "That sounds like a promising start."

"Does this mean we get to explore the library?" Finally, she'd see what a proper library was like. "Oh, I thought this day would be tedious, but it's turning out to be delightful!"

Nevander's rich laugh filled the room, wrapping around her like a caress. "Yes, it certainly is." His gaze lingered on her face, igniting a tingling warmth that spread through her body.

"I don't recall a library on the map. I wonder why?"

His expression flickered for a moment before settling into a neutral mask. "Perhaps it's part of the challenge".

Why was the library not on the map? Because when Nevander had carefully inked the contours of the estate onto the parchment, he hadn't dared to inflate Wynna's fragile hopes. Dane, Wynna's father, had strictly forbidden her entrance into the library.

But in the two years since Ciana and Wynna's return to the bustling Lionskye household, with its sprawling, chaotic library brimming with more books than stars in the sky, Wynna had found a literary haven where a child could get blissfully lost for countless sunlit hours.

The Ravenbluff estate library was full of leather bound first editions and tedious journals, atlases and encyclopedias. Nary a picture book to be found. Wynna wouldn't have enjoyed it, anyway. A pang of sadness washed

over Nevander. His young niece, with her curious spirit and eyes too often dulled by grief, had already endured so much loss.

"Perhaps it is not open to the public?" Kallessa mused.

These clues were surely the handiwork of Castien. Queen Lyra would never send her guests to peruse the Ravenbluff's personal spaces. But him? He'd never felt like a guest in this house. Even as boys, Lyra had treated him just like Castien and Dane. He'd never thanked her for that. Perhaps one day he could figure out how.

"How will we find it, then?" Kallessa's eyes, brimming with simple trust, bore into him. Trust for a simple man, not a prince of her country. The weight of his deception pressed down on him, threatening to crush the fragile connection between them.

East wing, second floor, he wanted to blurt out. Instead, he swallowed hard, his jaw clenching against the truth.

"I suppose we can do some exploring," he offered, forcing a casual shrug. His smile felt brittle, barely reaching his eyes. "We know where it isn't, and that's a start."

He gestured down the corridor, where golden light slanted through windows, painting warm rectangles on the cool marble floor.

Kallessa paused by a vast picture window, drinking in the view.

The dormant vineyard crawled over the hills, its vines stitched across the earth like veins, clinging to the last golden leaves of autumn. A serene lake shimmered in the distance, mirroring wisps of clouds drifting in the clear blue sky. And in the foreground, a hedge maze wove, whispering of forgotten paths and hidden turns.

Her breath fogged the glass as she pointed. "Oh, look. I see lots of folks out in the gardens. Is that a maze?"

Nevander chuckled, his warmth radiating beside her. "Indeed. We could try it out later, if you'd like."

She turned, her lips quirking. "I don't know. I've been told I can be directionally challenged."

Amusement danced in his eyes. "Is that what they call it nowadays?"

“Among polite society,” she quipped, raising an eyebrow.

A mischievous smile tugged at his lips. “Well, my dear, I am an exceptional navigator. We’ll explore it together.”

Kallessa faced the windows again, a frown creasing her brow. “Why is everyone outside except for us?” They hadn’t encountered another soul besides staff as they roamed the halls. Wasn’t that odd? Not that she minded. The more peace, and the less scrutiny by society, the better.

While she’d been lost in thought, Nevander had stepped away. “Good question,” he said, voice deepened with intrigue as he swung open a set of ornate double doors. “But I think I just found the library.”

The library unfolded before them, a sanctuary of order and symmetry. Two massive walls of hardback books flanked an equally massive stone fireplace that soared upward to an enormous skylight, letting in the midday sun. The scent of aged paper and old leather filled the air, mingling with the cool ashes in the fireplace.

Green velvet armchairs sat in strategic places about the room for maximum light, with mahogany side tables and desks covered with ledgers, ink pots, and scrolls. Plush rugs in maroons and golds softened the flooring, and tapestries of landscapes warmed the walls.

Oh yes, she could lose herself in here for days. “How will we ever know what book it is? Look at this place. There must be thousands of books in here.”

She roamed the room, fingers brushing against spines. Atlases and hefty tomes stood alongside smaller, more delicate volumes. Nevander stood at a grand table in the room’s heart, his tanned hands tracing over a map’s surface.

She remembered those hands gripped around her waist. That fateful night of their first meeting in the stable. When he was a dark stranger, and her, his momentary captive. The musky scent of hay and horses, his wild eyes glinting in the dim lantern light...

As her gaze met his, the emerald brilliance of his eyes captivated her, shimmering in the daylight, so different from the dark glow of that night. For a moment, she glimpsed that untamed wildness again, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared, replaced by his well-mannered society gaze and a warm smile.

“Let’s review the clue once more.” He approached with purposeful strides, and she found herself rooted to the spot, paralyzed by his presence.

An undeniable aura of power emanated from him, perhaps a remnant of his years as a soldier.

“Hmm? Oh, yes.” She fumbled for the folded card in her pocket. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they read the clue. Well, she attempted to, but the heat from his body made it impossible for her to focus on the words.

His voice broke through her mind, startling her. She’d been concentrating so hard on not looking like his nearness frazzled her she almost jumped.

“It mentions fire, so we can start by the fireplace. It also mentions something about the dead. I’m unsure if it refers to the subject or the author.”

She let Nevander lead, falling back to hide her flustered state. And it also gave her a fantastic view of his broad back and narrow hips. Oh, that wasn't helping with her thought processes at all. She rushed up beside him, forcing herself to concentrate on the game. Kallessa could gaze longingly at his backside later.

“I’ll start on this side,” Nevander gestured to the right, “if you’d like to search that side.”

She glanced over the vast collection of books, running her fingers along their spines. How long had it been since she’d had the luxury to sit down and read a book? Oh yes, she knew exactly how long. Five years. Those velvet armchairs looked so comfortable too, just begging someone to curl up in them.

Suddenly, her fingers froze. Beneath her fingertips, on a shelf in this foreign library, sat “The Life of a Single Heartbeat” by Tynan Respa, Dracia’s most beloved poet.

Tynan. The last time she’d seen him had been mere weeks before her life had changed forever, when he’d promised to ask her father once more for her hand in marriage. And then, she’d never heard from him again.

She had this same book under her bed at home. Had memorized every poem in the book she’d thought he’d written just for her. How foolish she’d been. He’d obviously been after her title, and she, young and stupid, had believed him. And then the same agonizing question begged to be answered again. If she had gone with her parents that fateful day, would they still be alive?

She slowly slid the slim book from the shelf, its familiar weight heavy in her hands. The dark green leather cover, adorned with elegant gold print,

felt like a ghost from her past. She cracked it open to the first page and froze, seeing his handwriting on the title page.

To Queen Lyra, my most beautiful fan. Many thanks for your patronage. Tynan.

Nausea washed over her as she snapped the book shut. *My most beautiful fan*. The same words he'd written in her copy. Her eyes stung. What was she doing, pretending to be engaged? This could only lead to more heartache. She knew how silly a heart could be. It didn't care about logic. The heart didn't understand the difference between the truth and a lie.

"Everything alright?" Nevander's voice floated to her, somehow near yet a world away.

The plush rugs had muffled his footsteps. She didn't have time to hide the pain in her eyes. "This place has stirred up some sad memories, that's all."

He gently grasped her elbow, guiding her to a soft armchair. "Let's ring for some tea and refreshments. I think I've found our clue." He held a plain blue book, its cover worn and tired. She settled into the armchair, trying to focus on the present. She still needed to win this game, no matter how distracted she'd become.

Nevander handed the book to her. "I'll be right back."

As his footsteps echoed down the hall, she took one more glance at the wall that held Tynan's book, then she resolutely turned her back to it. Kallessa sat there, drawing breaths that tasted of dust and lingering betrayals as she opened the blue book, finding comfort in the crisp sound of turning pages.

A cream-colored card fell out. Setting it aside, she read the title: *The History of Ravenbluff Estate* by Marlon Ravenbluff.

Scanning through it, she absorbed snippets about the estate's origins, the first vineyard, and the rose granite used in its stonework. She'd just run across an interesting bit about an affair when the door reopened and Nevander returned, bearing a large silver tray laden with dishes.

She rose to help him set it down. Thick slices of golden cheese lay neatly across a platter with fresh strawberries, wedges of pears and plump dates. A crock of whipped butter and lemon curd accompanied another plate of crusty bread studded with walnuts. Her mouth watered, her stomach reminding her she hadn't eaten breakfast.

"Where did you find all that?"

A sly grin adorned Nevander's face, making her insides clench. "I was fortunate to find a maid outside the hall."

After they'd eaten, they sat pondering the next clue. Nevander read it aloud.

You stand before me, book in hand
You do not see me, yet here I stand.
If I be on fire, quench my thirst,
Step through the portal. You won't be first.
The Axan Moon
Can't find you here,
To return from my clutches
You must have no fear.

"I have a feeling the next clue is still in this room," Kallessa said.

"Oh?" The sweet floral scent of her hair tickled his nose as she leaned in. Being near her all day, he thought he'd be used to her intoxicating scent, but it only made him want her more.

She sipped the last drops of her tea, leaving a hint of moisture on her lips. "It still talks about the book, like we're supposed to keep it, for one. For another, I think it's still talking about the fireplace."

She was stunning, her eyes aglow in the warm afternoon light. Her full lips were tinted berry-pink from the juicy strawberries they'd eaten. Her tongue darted out, leaving her lower lip glistening. He wanted to bolt over the table and taste the tart flavor on her lips. Her soft intake of breath told him she noticed him staring.

"Ah, yes." He glanced down at the clue again.

Earlier, when he'd caught her studying him, he could've sworn he'd glimpsed her thoughts. That night in the stables.

It was seared into his memory. Her soft waist caught in his grasp, those dark curls draped across her shoulders as he'd crushed her against him. He missed those unrestrained curls that had been secured with pins and clips ever since. One of these days, he was going to slip every one of those awful

pins from that glorious mane and watch each lock cascade down into his hands.

"You mentioned secret passageways in the estate," her words laced with intrigue. "Could the fireplace hide one?" Kallessa's mind seemed to be back in the game. He struggled to bring his back, as well.

She glided to the fireplace, peering up the flue. "It appears to be closed," she called back.

He rose and joined her. If he were to have a secret door, how would he trigger it?

Kallessa ran her hands along the mantel and ornate woodwork, murmuring, "It must be here somewhere."

Nevander leaned in to examine the dark interior of the fireplace, resting one hand against the bookshelf for support. As he peered up into the chimney, a low, grinding groan filled the air. The floor beneath them began to move, swinging in a dizzying circle. Kallessa screamed and he grasped her shoulders. They had no choice but to cling to each other until the chaos stopped. And when it finally ground to a halt, darkness enveloped them completely. Utter darkness, with not a glimmer of light leaking in from anywhere. Nevander swallowed, sparks flashing before his eyes.

"Nevander?" Kallessa whispered. Her hand lay flat against his chest.

"That was rather abrupt," he said, his voice strained. "Can you see anything?"

"Not a thing. Is this the secret passageway?"

"If it is, there better be a lantern in here." Nevander's laugh sounded hollow. "I'd rather not explore in the pitch dark."

"Neither would I," Kallessa agreed, apprehension edging her tone. "I'll explore this wall if you want to explore the other. That way, we can get an idea of our surroundings."

As she stepped away from him, he heard her fingers sliding along the walls. He stepped back until he hit a stone wall and ran his hands across the uneven texture. The walls were damp and rough. He walked three paces and hit a wall, three more paces and hit another wall. A tightness was forming in his chest. Three more paces and he ran into Kallessa.

"It appears we're in a tiny chamber, not a tunnel," Kallessa mused. "I wonder what this was used for? A secret supply closet?" Her ramblings faded to the background. They were trapped.

Trapped.

His throat tightened as memories flooded him. A strangled gasp escaped him and he disguised it with a cough. He had to get control of himself.

"Nevander?" Her voice cut through his spiraling thoughts. "Are you listening to me?"

"I'm sorry," he rasped. Were the walls getting closer? Sweat beaded his temple despite the clammy chill of the room. He groped at the unyielding granite, his heart racing.

"Are you alright?" Her words were muffled by the roaring in his ears.

What could he say? He was about to embarrass himself by breaking down and crying like a baby any minute.

He shook his head. No, she couldn't see that. Because it was darker than anything he'd experienced since that night.

"No," he choked out, his voiced scraping against the unforgiving walls.

Her hand found his, gripping his clammy fingers. "You're shaking. Please tell me what's wrong."

Would she ridicule him for this weakness? What did it matter now? They were probably going to die in here when the air ran out.

"Tight spaces make me nervous." That was the understatement of the century.

She squeezed his hand encouragingly.

"I," he began, but his voice failed him. He cleared his throat against the tightness and tried again. He couldn't control the tremor in his voice, and he ground his teeth.

Finally he said, "I shouldn't still be afraid."

Her other hand rested gently against his chest, its warmth a stark contrast to the cold surroundings. "There's nothing wrong with being afraid."

She didn't understand. He'd led fleets of ships, battled countless enemies, confronted the keenest minds in courtrooms, and he was going to let this get him?

"Tell me," she implored. Her voice seemed filled with genuine concern. But was it sincere?

He inhaled the damp air. It felt like he was inhaling the darkness with it. But if he didn't start talking, even just to appease her, he would start screaming until the walls fell down on their heads, finishing them off. As it was, his heart thundered in his ears and their midday meal rolled in his gut.

"I fell down an old well when I was a child of seven or eight," he finally confessed, his words breaking the suffocating silence.

“It was in the woods on our estate. Apparently, the wood that covered it had rotted and I, being a wayward child, stepped right into it. I fell several yards down and sprained my ankle. The well was damp and musty, having dried up who knows how long ago.” He swallowed. Flickers of that day were so vague in his memory that it was hard to remember the full details of the well. “I tried to crawl up the stone walls at first, but my ankle hurt so badly I couldn’t.”

He still felt that sprained ankle on damp days.

“I called for help for what seemed like hours, the afternoon falling into evening. Then darkness fell. It was a moonless night in the woods. It felt as dark as this. I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. I screamed and cried half the night until I exhausted myself. Then I sat shivering, my ankle swollen and throbbing, my arms and legs bruised and bleeding. My throat was so dry it ached. I realized I might die, and to a child, that is the most horrible thought ever.”

“Oh, Nevander,” Kallessa murmured, enveloping him in her arms. Her warmth barely penetrated the icy horror freezing his soul.

“I thought I would die alone and it would be a hundred years before they found my dried up bones. I must have passed out because when I next opened my eyes, it was daylight and I heard my father’s voice calling me. I screamed with what voice I had left. Only a raspy wheeze came from my throat, but somehow, my father heard me. My father’s face leaning over that tiny opening was like the face of an angel. I don’t remember anything after that for many days. I think I had a fever. But I could never stand small places after that.” His voice trailed off.

That was a true story.

But it wasn’t the real reason he feared the cold, dark enclosure.

That memory clawed at the edges of his mind, demanding entrance. He struggled to push it back, but it was no use. The scenes rushed in, uninhibited and raw as the day it happened.

The sharp, searing pain of a bullet tearing through his shoulder during the Birazahian war. The taste of bitter, frozen earth, invading his screaming mouth as he tumbled into the foxhole.

The crushing weight of the frozen dirt burying him alive, plunging him into a suffocating darkness. His blood, hot and slick, soaking into the ground, leaving behind a bone-deep cold.

Too weak from blood loss and pain to dig himself out, he'd been trapped beneath the earth while the screams and shouts of his comrades raged around him, their deaths and horrors muffled by the mound of hard soil crushing down on his collapsed chest. Choking. Helpless. Alone.

A gasp escaped his lips. His body went rigid, heart pounding out of control as his last night on the battlefield played over and over behind his wide eyes. That was the true reason he hated the suffocating grip of darkness. It brought him back to that frozen foxhole, trapped, surrounded by death that should have been victory.

Nevander's body went rigid, his gasps echoing in the tiny space. Kallessa's heart clenched. She had to do something, had to pull him out of the horrors trapping his mind.

What he needed was a distraction.

Sliding her hands up his back, she molded herself against him. His thundering heartbeat reverberated through her. Rising on her tiptoes, she found the column of his neck with her lips. His heady scent of clove and cedar enveloped her like the heat of summer.

Nevander swallowed hard as she kissed him, his skin blazing beneath her touch. He tasted of crisp wind and scorching sunlight, raw and elemental. The darkness heightened every sensation—the rasp of his stubble, the salt on his skin, the tremor that ran through him. And it was… She gasped, a rush of desire leaving her lightheaded.

More. She wanted more.

A low moan vibrated in his chest as she traced a path to his ear and his muscles tensed around her. She nipped his earlobe, catching the tender flesh between her teeth. At once she was shocked by her own audacity and amazed at the pleasure of it, her body feeling languid and heavy. She dared trace her lips along the rim of his ear.

A gasp ripped from his throat and his arms crushed her against him as he bent his head. "What are you doing to me?" The guttural rasp sent shivers racing down her spine.

Rough fingertips slid into her hair, scattering pins across the floor. He tilted her face upward, holding her there for one thunderous heartbeat. Their breaths mingled, lips a whisper apart.

Nevander swore, the curse rumbling through her bones.

Then he closed that final, aching distance.

Stone bit into Kallessa's back as Nevander pinned her against the cold wall, his solid frame unyielding in the velvety darkness. His lips crashed into hers, demanding and hungry, stealing her breath away. She clutched at his broad shoulders, fingers digging into taut muscle, as his tongue stroked into her mouth, exploring, claiming. The taste of him, spiced and intoxicating, flooded her senses. Heat bloomed in her core, spreading like wildfire through her veins as his beard scraped deliciously against her skin.

Calloused hands roamed down her sides, over the curves of her waist, igniting sparks beneath her skin. Ripping his lips from hers, his mouth blazed a scorching trail down her neck, each ragged breath sending shockwaves through her. Kallessa's fingers tangled in his silky hair, as waves of pleasure threatened to undo her.

The darkness stripped away every inhibition society placed on her. Here, she was merely sensation, pleasure, energy. Kallessa arched against him, a breathless whimper escaping. Her legs trembled, muscles quivering with delicious tension as he wrapped his palms around her back, pulling her closer. Her feet nearly left the floor as his lips traced her shoulder blade, her head spinning with pleasure.

She pressed her palms against the rough granite behind her, trying to anchor herself to reality. Its chill was a stark contrast to Nevander's heat that consumed her.

The wall shifted beneath her hands.

A grinding rumble echoed as the stone panel slid inward, the floor spinning in a dizzying whirl. Kallessa's stomach lurched, her scream caught in her throat as blinding sunlight flooded her vision.

She squeezed her eyes shut, gripping Nevander for balance as her head spun. His heart still hammered against hers, his breath hot on her cheek.

She blinked against the harsh light, the library slowly coming into focus.

And standing there, as if waiting on them, was Castien, the crown prince of Krithadea.

His mild baritone cut through the haze in her head. "Am I interrupting?"

Seventeen

MADNESS.

Madness was the only word to describe the turbulent storm raging inside Nevander as he forced himself to let go of Kallessa. His fingers trailed along her soft skin, unwilling to break contact. Every inch of his body burned with an intensity he'd never known, a searing desire that consumed him utterly.

He sucked in a ragged breath, the scent of her hair flooding his senses. Blossoms and honey, sweet and intoxicating. The memory of her lips on his would be forever seared into his mind, her taste branded onto his soul. How could one woman undo him so completely?

Nevander clenched his fists, nails biting into his palms as he fought for control. Heat coiled low in his abdomen, muscles tensing with the urge to pull her back into his embrace. To drown in her kisses once more. He swallowed hard against the desire clawing at his throat. This... this was madness.

His gaze snapped to the prince. Castien stood quietly, the faint click of his signet ring tapping against the back of a chair the only sound in the taut silence. Nevander's thoughts churned in chaos, his pulse hammering at his temples as he ground his teeth. Did that bastard set this whole thing up?

Beside him, Kallessa straightened her gown, the fabric rustling softly under her fingers. She attempted to slow her own breath, the air feeling heavy and charged.

Shame washed over Nevander. He'd behaved like an animal, devouring her as if she were merely a vessel for the tempest raging inside him. He'd let the darkness take over, feeding it with each desperate caress, each fevered kiss as he ravaged her.

His stomach churned as memories of his last drunken night with his brother, Tarrick, surfaced. Waking up next to a strange woman, the room reeking of vodka and vomit, with no recollection of what had transpired. He'd sworn never to lose control like that again.

If Castien wasn't staring at them, waiting for an answer, he would have fallen to his knees and begged for forgiveness. He was a prince of the realm, not some beast driven by base instincts.

Kallessa swallowed, a small, audible click in her throat betraying her nervousness.

Of all the times he'd had to uphold this ridiculous charade, to pretend he hadn't grown up with Castien, hadn't spent countless summers running around the estate with him, this was the absolute worst.

He glanced down at Kallessa. Her lips were lusciously swollen and pink from his kisses, their taste lingering on his tongue. Her cheeks were still flushed. Her hair was only loosely held by the few pins left, the whole knot raked to the side. She looked like a creature out of a dream, one he could never claim.

"If you're searching for the fourth clue," Castien's voice broke the silence, the sound smooth and velvety, "you were close. Although I don't think you were too concerned about the game, from the looks of it."

Kallessa curtsied, a curl falling down her shoulder. "We were somehow trapped, my lord. The fireplace, you see." She gestured behind them.

Castien rubbed his chin. "Ah yes. You found great-grandfather Ravenbluff's hidden liquor cabinet. His vintages were the envy of his peers."

The prince strolled toward the fireplace and gently pressed a moss-green book to the left, stepping back from the platform. "I suppose it's a bit of a booby trap too, for those who are overly nosy." The fireplace swung open slowly, revealing the entrance to the small room. "You have to press the book just right, not too much."

Sunlight streamed into the recess, painting the granite walls in soft light and shadow. Nevander's stomach clenched as he stared into that tiny cell. The stark walls, once so oppressive, now stood benign in the afternoon

glow. A creamy card with golden letters rested solitary on a high shelf, as if waiting for this exact moment of discovery.

Castien stepped back. “I must be running along now. Enjoy the rest of the game. Maybe stay out of dark places, just in case.” Then he winked at Kallessa.

Nevander suppressed a sudden urge to knock the prince across the room. Castien was toying with them. But of course he was. That’s what he did.

Kallessa turned as soon as Castien disappeared and swiftly reentered that dreadful little space, snatching the card off of the shelf before slipping back out.

Before she could break the seal, Nevander grasp her hand. Startled, she looked up, her golden eyes wide.

He wanted to crush her to him, to feel those soft curves against his body again, to kiss those luscious lips. The pain of separation shot through his chest.

But he dropped his hands from hers and stepped back, feeling the cool air between them.

“Please let me apologize. I didn’t behave as a gentleman should. I took advantage of you. It won’t happen again.” His body cried out against him at those words. She’d been his savior, his anchor in that darkness, where he was drowning in a sea of nightmares.

But he was using her. Like so many others, he was using her to push away the horrors of the bloody war. And he’d sworn to himself he would never do that again.

Kallessa’s eyebrows furrowed. “I didn’t mind.”

Oh, this woman! She didn’t mind? Did she have any idea what that did to the barely leashed desire in him? He clenched his fists, feeling his blunt nails cut into his palms.

“It won’t happen again,” he said, his voice strained like a bowstring.

Kallessa’s lashes fluttered, a weight in the air as tangible as the towering bookshelves that surrounded them. She looked down at the card in her hand, her fingers tracing the embossed letters. When she looked up, a forced smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“You’re right. We shouldn’t have done that. I’ll behave from now on.”

“Listen, it wasn’t you,” he said. Although, it was entirely her. Everything about her sung to him. Her sweet voice, her big damn doe eyes, those curves, those lips.

“I’m entirely at fault. I sought to distract you,” she continued.

Yes, but out of concern. She’d thought about him, his wellbeing. What had he been thinking about? Himself.

Nevander’s gaze swept across the room. Long beams of glowing afternoon sun illuminated the dark wood paneling, such a stark contrast to the suffocating darkness of mere moment before. But that darkness now hid a sweet ache of desire inside him.

He forced his gaze back to her, forced his features back into their pleasant mask. It was the hardest thing he’d done in months.

“Let’s just forget this happened, alright?”

He wouldn’t forget it. He’d add it to his list of memories that haunted his nights.

Kallessa walked across the library to a mirror where she repaired her hair, her slender hands deftly twisting and pinning her locks back into place before turning to him, her face still flushed.

“Of course,” she said. Then she smiled, but he caught the faintest tremble of her lips before she continue. “We still have a treasure to find, don’t we?”

The day slipped away in a whirlwind of clues, laughter, and exploration. Yet with each lull in conversation, Kallessa’s mind drifted back to that unforgettable kiss.

She closed her eyes, and the memory engulfed her. Nevander’s scent—a blend of cedar, sunshine, and raw desire, wrapped around her. His lips, velvety and insistent, had seared a promise of heat into her world of chilled solitude. Her skin still tingled where his fingers had traced paths of fire, where he’d held her tightly against his hard planes.

In all her twenty-two years, Kallessa had never known it could be like this between a man and a woman. She’d seen her parents kiss before, but this... This was an awakening, raw and unparalleled, leaving her with a yearning she couldn’t name.

Now she sat in her chambers, alone. Staring at the Axan moon trophy on the dresser. It was beautiful in its own right. The lustrous wood carving of a

moon caught in a claw, sinuous vines and blooming flowers twining around the base. The flicker of the fireplace made it glow golden.

Too bad it wasn't actually a pile of gold. But what person invited to the illustrious Ravenbluff estate, home of the royal Krithadean family, was teetering on the edge of destitution? Of course, the reward wouldn't be monetary. Such things were an insult to the wealthy.

When this bubble burst in a week and a half, the trophy would stay here when she left. She'd leave it behind like everything, and everyone, else. Not a new concept.

But that ridiculous trophy symbolized freedom, however tenuous it might be. If Prince Castien kept his word, he'd share her ideas with the princess of Dracia. One last chance at salvation.

One and a half weeks. That's all the time she had left with Nevander. It was unsettling how close she felt to him already, drawn in by his attentiveness, the way he saw her as an equal, shared his own thoughts.

Kissed her like a starving man.

Then treated her like his kid sister the rest of the day.

Exhaustion crashed over Kallessa. She flopped back against the plush pillows, blowing stray strands of hair from her flushed face. Gingerly, she traced the curve of her lips with her fingertips, savoring the lingering tingle of Nevander's kiss. That heated moment in the shadows had been pure ecstasy, his mouth devouring hers with a hunger that left her breathless and aching for more.

Yet afterwards, he'd pretended nothing had happened, as if he hadn't coaxed those gasps of pleasure from her. Her cheeks burned. She wasn't as good at pretending as he was.

A sudden scraping noise from his chambers made her tense. It sounded like furniture being dragged across the floor with screeching protest. She tiptoed to the door and pressed her ear against the shared barrier. What was he doing in there?

The adjoining door to Kallessa's chambers taunted Nevander. Mocked him with its mere three inches of wood separating them. His fingers tingled with

the urge to turn the knob. Open the door.

Perhaps he'd find her at the dressing table, brushing her hair. Or in an upholstered chair, feet drawn up, reading a book.

Or sprawled across that vast bed, tousled hair framing flushed cheeks, a gauzy chemise draped across her soft body—

He jerked his thoughts back, scanning the room frantically. The chest of drawers. Perfect. He shoved it across the floor, barricading the door. It screeched, sending up a plume of dust in its wake. Not enough. He added two chairs for good measure.

He tapped his foot, then paced the room. He had to get out of there.

Snatching his cloak, he strode from the room, ignoring Akeela's protesting meow.

Nevander found Castien back in the sunroom, braziers blasting heat and stinking flowers coating his nostrils. A fat crescent moon sat on the horizon.

As Nevander entered, Castien glanced up, his eyes bleary and glazed.

"I don't want to talk to you," he said, his voice slurring slightly. He was draped over a cushioned armchair in the corner, his body in shadow, shirt half unbuttoned. His pale chest glistened in the sliver of moonlight, each rib jutting out against his abdomen.

"Too bad." Nevander flung off his cloak and dropped into the chair beside him. "I'm not leaving."

Castien stared out across the vast darkness beyond the windows before he closed his eyes and rested his head against the chair. Silence stretched between them. The put-together prince, always dressed for the occasion, never showing vulnerability, now looked disheveled. His sleek black hair fell in disarray across his forehead, his boots kicked off his stocking feet. A silver tray held browning apple slices next to an empty goblet stained with a dark reddish liquid on the table between them.

Nevander lifted the goblet, a sickly sweet scent curling in his nostrils. Laudanum. He set it down, stomach churning.

"I take no responsibility for anything I say tonight," Castien mumbled. "Be warned."

"We are pathetic, the two of us," he continued, his voice a hollow shadow of its usual commanding tone. "I've drugged myself into oblivion to escape this broken shell." He cracked open his eyes, meeting Nevander's gaze. "And you, the tragic war hero, ensnared by his own past."

The war. Nevander hadn't thought about it since the library, when an angel had banished those thoughts with her touch, her warmth. What happened when these two weeks ended?

"War is nothing but horror," Nevander said bitterly. "There's no honor in killing. No victory for survivors."

"You felt the glory of a good fight." Castien's voice rose. "Don't lie and tell me you didn't. You were out fighting, leading, while I was trapped here, suffering." He swiped his hair from his shadowed gray eyes, his movement jerky.

"Is that what you think you missed? Glory?" Nevander pushed up from his chair and paced the room, his boots echoing hollowly on the stone floor. He shoved his hands through his hair. "I watched my men *die*. My men. They trusted me to lead them. Instead, they were all slaughtered like cattle in those frozen mountains." Blood and screams flooded his senses—metallic tang mixing with icy air, terrified faces lit by firelight. Boys, hardly grown, looking to their captain with hope. Hope he'd failed to provide.

He knelt before Castien, whose unfocused eyes tracked him. "I'm glad you weren't there. You don't have those memories haunting every moment."

Castien's lips curled into what could have been a smile, or it could have been a sneer. "Do you know there's a ballad written about Prince Nevander, the bravest captain in the Dracian navy?" He laughed, the sound harsh against the glass walls. "Would you like me to sing it to you?"

Nevander jerked up. "Stop it."

"And the women all swoon every time the bards sing of your exploits. Sooo romantic!" Castien leaned forward, his pale eyes glinting in the wavering light. "And while you were away at sea, doing your princely duty and having stirring ballads written about your valor in battle, I was back here, pissing the bed and being spoon fed by a nurse like a helpless, bedridden child." His last words came out as a harsh whisper.

The anger drained from Nevander. He sank back into his chair, his bones suddenly feeling old beyond his years. "I'm sorry, Cas. I'm sorry about the whole mess. About Dane, about it all. But I'm still not sorry you didn't fight in the war."

Castien turned away, his eyes shut once more, his head resting against the velvet cushion. The weak moonlight laid melancholic stripes on the stonework, interspersed with patches of darkness formed by the panes.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “I know you weren’t hunting for suspects today, since you were wrapped around that pretty lady Kallessa like a vine.”

There were no bloody suspects. Nevander hadn’t seen a single thing out of place since the two Birazahians talking trash about the Ravenbluff family. And Castien had dismissed that.

“You have to move her back to her own rooms, or new rooms across the estate.” Nevander squeezed the armchair cushions, the leather protesting under his fingertips. “Or perhaps to a neighbor’s estate.”

Castien barked a short laugh. “Engagement going well, then?”

Nevander shook his head, his jaw clenching. “I can’t have her that close to me.” Flashes of heat and skin invaded his thoughts and he pushed them away.

Castien remained silent, eyes closed again. He looked like a rag doll, draped limply across the upholstered chair, boneless and exhausted, his slender wrist dangling over the carved mahogany armrest. His face was pale and drawn, dark circles under his eyes.

“Why did you plan the treasure hunt for us indoors while everyone else was outside?” Nevander asked. “What are you up to?”

“Do you know who she is?” Castien mumbled. His lips barely moved as he spoke.

“I know her name, where she’s from. I know her kisses are addictive.” Nevander dropped his face into his hands. “That’s why I’m here instead of there.”

“If I were engaged, I’d try to get to know my fiancé better.” Castien’s words had dropped to a whisper.

“We’re not engaged!” Nevander exploded, his hands jerking from his face.

Castien watched him from under weighted lids, something dark sliding behind his pale eyes.

“Sometimes I hate you, Nevander Lionskye.” Castien said as his eyes fluttered shut. That usual sardonic, smooth tenor was gone. In its place was something broken. In his words, was a heartache Nevander had never heard before. An injury that ran deeper than he could have imagined.

There was a long pause before the prince continued, his breaths smoothing out, on the verge of sleep. “I wish I had someone to love.” Castien slurred out those last words before he began to softly snore.

Eighteen

KALLESSA TOSSED AND TURNED in the overly soft bed, sleep eluding her. The memory of Nevander's kiss in the darkness of the hidden room played on repeat in her mind, his touch ghosting across her skin. Hours ago, she'd heard his door open and shut. He hadn't returned.

A faint scratching noise from the other side of their adjoining door caught her attention. She held her breath, straining to listen.

Meow!

The plaintive cry tugged at her heart. It must be that little gray cat she'd seen with Nevander during his travels. The scratching intensified, accompanied by more urgent meowing. Kallessa bit her lip. If this kept up, the door would be damaged. But more importantly, the poor thing sounded distressed.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, her bare feet sinking into the plush carpet. Her nightgown whispered against her skin as she padded to the door.

Her hand hovered over the lock. Should she? What if Nevander returned and found her in his room? Heat crept up her neck at the thought. But he'd made it clear he wanted nothing to do with her, hadn't he?

Another pitiful meow decided for her.

Kallessa turned the lock and pulled. The door swung open to reveal a dresser and two upholstered chairs haphazardly shoved against it. Her brow furrowed. Did he really think she'd try to break in? To do what—throw herself at him? The thought stung more than she cared to admit.

A flash of movement caught her eye. The cat was under the dresser, its claws tangled in what looked like a cravat. The more it struggled, the tighter it became ensnared.

Kallessa dropped to her hands and knees, the cold floor a shock against her skin. She wriggled partway under the dresser, arm outstretched. Her fingers barely grazed the silky fabric.

"Easy, little one," she cooed. "I'm trying to help—"

Sharp claws raked across her knuckles. Kallessa jerked back with a hiss, examining the thin red lines on her skin.

"Blast it all," she muttered. "I know you're scared, but I'm on your side here."

The cat's mournful cries tugged at her heart. She couldn't leave it like this. But if she tried Nevander's main door, someone might see her. The scandal would be...

No. There was only one option.

Kallessa stood, eyeing the makeshift barricade. "Please, don't let him come back now," she whispered, then began to climb. She teetered atop the dresser for a moment before dropping to the other side with a soft thud.

Shoving the chairs aside, she knelt by the dresser once more. That's when she realized the cravat was caught in the bottom drawer. Kallessa tugged, but it wouldn't budge.

"How in the world did you manage this?" she asked the cat, who only yowled in response. "He left you behind, did he? Poor thing." She sighed. "I know the feeling."

Lying on her stomach, Kallessa shimmied partway under the dresser. The position was awkward, leaving her arms just barely free to work.

She placed one hand on the cat to keep it still, using the other to attack the knots. The silk was already in tatters. "I hope this wasn't his favorite," she muttered.

Just as she loosened the first tangle, needle-sharp claws dug into her knuckle. Kallessa yelped, instinctively jerking back. Her head connected with the underside of the dresser with a dull thunk.

"Ow! Blast it!" she hissed through clenched teeth. "Come on now, I'm trying to help, you little—"

The creak of the opening door cut her off mid-sentence. Kallessa froze, her heart leaping into her throat.

Nevander's thoughts churned as he approached his suite. He didn't want to return, but he couldn't stand to linger in Castien's room another moment.

He'd carried Castien back to his suite, and the slight weight of his drugged body still lingered in Nevander's arms, a stark reminder of his friend's frailty. He hated it.

On a night like this, only bad dreams awaited him.

His hand hesitated on the doorknob, indecision gripping him. A muffled curse from within froze him in place. Kallessa's voice.

Heart racing, he flung the door open, hand instinctively flying to his dagger. The sight before him sent him stumbling back against the doorframe, a startled gasp escaping his lips.

Kallessa lay sprawled on her stomach, the upper half of her body hidden beneath his dresser—the very one he'd shoved against their adjoining doors to keep himself from invading her privacy. Now, the lower half of her body presented a vision that sent heat coursing through him.

Her pale ankles and slender feet contrasted sharply with the deep blue of her dressing gown, which had ridden up to reveal a tantalizing expanse of leg. Nevander's gaze traveled the length of her body, lingering on her wiggling toes. He swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry.

She stilled abruptly. "Nevander?" Her voice trembled, muffled by the dresser.

He shook himself, forcing his mind away from dangerous territory. "What are you doing?"

"Your cat. She's—"

Of course. Akeela, the little troublemaker, had defied him yet again.

Kallessa's rear wiggled once more, and Nevander bit back a groan. If she didn't stop that, he'd have an entirely different problem on his hands.

"I'm stuck!" Her voice held a note of panic now.

Nevander snapped to attention. Couldn't he get himself together long enough to help her? "Hold on," he said, wrapping his hands around her ankles. The softness of her skin sent a jolt through him, but he pushed the

sensation aside, focusing on the task at hand. He tugged gently, but she didn't budge.

"Ow! Wait!" she cried. "My elbow is jammed under the leg."

Nevander quickly shoved the chairs out of the way. "If I lift the dresser, can you slide out?"

"I'm not sure," she mumbled, her voice tinged with embarrassment. "This is mortifying."

He lay down beside her, acutely aware of her body heat bleeding through his thin shirt. It felt glorious, tempting him to fling the dresser aside and pull her into his arms. But he steeled himself, reaching past her to grasp at Akeela.

The cat, of course, had wedged herself into the farthest corner. Nevander stretched, feeling his shirt rip across the shoulder. Finally, his fingers closed around fur and fabric. He carefully untangled them all, then pulled back and shoved the dresser aside.

Kallessa sat up, cradling Akeela in her arms. A shredded green cravat hung from the cat's claws. Kallessa's carefully braided hair was now peppered with dust and cat fur. She handed Akeela to Nevander and promptly began sneezing, the tiny sounds oddly endearing.

Nevander glared at the cat as he unwound what remained of his favorite cravat. "You little brat," he muttered. "I leave you alone for a few hours, and this is what you do?"

Akeela ignored him, focusing instead on grooming a paw. Nevander set her down with a sigh and turned back to Kallessa.

His breath caught. Her dark gown was rumpled, clinging to her curves in a way that made his pulse quicken. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. Golden lamp light bathed her in softness. But then he noticed the slight scratches on her hands, tiny beads of blood welling up.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured, gently taking her hands in his. The touch sent sparks through him, and he saw her eyes widen slightly. "Let's get you cleaned up."

He guided her to a chair, shoving away the fact that she was in his room in the middle of the night. Dipping a linen cloth in the basin, he began to tenderly clean her wounds. She sat quietly, her body tense beneath his ministrations.

As he worked, Nevander found himself intensely aware of every detail: the softness of her skin, the slight tremble in her fingers, the way her breath

hitched when he touched a particularly sensitive spot. The air between them seemed to thicken, charged with unspoken tension.

Suddenly, Kallessa gasped. Nevander's eyes snapped to her face. "Did I hurt you?"

But her gaze wasn't on their hands. It was fixed on his shoulder, where his torn shirt exposed a jagged scar. Her fingers reached out, hesitating just shy of touching him.

"Nevander," she whispered. "What happened to you?"

She couldn't stop staring at that angry pink scar marring the perfect tan flesh of his muscular shoulder.

Kallessa hadn't dared to make eye contact with Nevander as he tended to her hands. She was so embarrassed, she wanted to crawl back under the dresser and hide forever. And the gentle touch of his calloused fingers against her skin sent a wave of conflicting emotions coursing through her body, tightening her throat and making her eyes water.

But a movement exposing the tear in his shirt had her glancing up. Now she was transfixed, her gaze riveted to the scar.

Nevander pulled back, attempting to close the gap in his shirt. But it was too late, the image was seared into her mind.

She flicked her gaze up, catching a glimpse of phantom shadows in his eyes before he looked down again, resuming his ministrations with forced casualness.

The silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken words. Finally, Nevander's low voice broke through. "I told you I fought in the war, right?"

Kallessa nodded, studying his face. It was a carefully neutral mask, one she'd come to recognize as his shield against the world.

He swallowed, adam's apple bobbing. "I was hit with a musket ball. Bloody thing tore right through me."

The words tumbled from her lips before she could stop them. "May I touch it?"

Nevander's head snapped up, startled. His brows furrowed, but after a moment's hesitation, he murmured, "If you want."

With trembling fingers, Kallessa pushed the torn linen aside. The scar looked angry, as if it still held the pain of that moment. She gingerly touched the flesh, finding it hot and oddly smooth beneath her fingertips. Nevander's muscles twitched at her touch.

"Does it hurt?" she whispered, her voice barely audible.

"No," he breathed, but the strain in his voice betrayed him.

"It must have been excruciating when it happened."

His eyes darkened. "You have no idea."

In one fluid motion, Nevander grasped her hand, pulling it away from the scar. But instead of releasing her, he brought her fingers to his lips. Slowly, deliberately, he kissed each scratch across her skin. His warm breath sent shivers down her spine, igniting a fire low in her belly.

He glanced up through his lashes, and Kallessa's heart nearly stopped. He looked like a fallen angel, torn between destruction and salvation, with disheveled golden hair and a rumpled shirt. This is what she would see every time she closed her eyes.

The air between them crackled with tension. Kallessa's pulse raced, her skin hypersensitive to his every touch. She wanted to reach out, to trace those eyelashes with her fingertips, to—

Nevander abruptly stopped, gently resting her hands in her lap. The loss of contact felt startling, his warmth so suddenly removed.

"I'm very sorry about my naughty cat," he said, his voice husky. "Akeela has a way of entangling herself in more than just cravats."

Kallessa didn't care about the cat or her scratched hands. All she could focus on was Nevander's nearness, the heat radiating from his body. She bit her lip, feeling a flush creep up her neck and into her cheeks.

Nevander's sharp intake of breath cut through the silence. His eyes, dark with an emotion Kallessa couldn't quite name, locked onto her mouth. For a heartbeat, she thought he might kiss her.

Instead, he cleared his throat. "Shall I help you back to your room?" The words came out strained, as if it took all his willpower to offer.

Nineteen

KALLESSA JOLTED AWAKE TO a thunderous pounding on her door, the doorknob rattling violently. Disoriented and flustered, she sat upright, trying to get her bearings. After the events of last night that included a naughty cat and an alluring Nevander, it was a wonder she'd slept at all.

"Kallessa, open this door immediately," Dovina's voice, sharp with impatience, cut through the wood.

Scrambling out of bed, Kallessa fumbled with her robe, her fingers clumsy with sleep. Dovina was going to rouse the entire estate with her banging. She yanked the door open just as Dovina raised her fist to knock again.

Her cousin barreled past her, slamming the door hard enough to rattle the hinges. Kallessa winced. So much for not waking others.

"Where were you yesterday?" Dovina demanded, her eyes flashing. "I didn't see you at the games."

Kallessa's mind raced, searching for a plausible excuse. "Nevander and I spent the day indoors," she said, hoping the vagueness would suffice.

"Actually, I don't care," Dovina snapped, pacing the room like a caged animal. Her heels dug into the plush carpet with each turn. "You won't believe what happened this morning."

Kallessa perched on the edge of her bed, rubbing her eyes and bracing herself for whatever drama was about to unfold.

“Before dawn, the prince summoned me to his sitting room,” Dovina said, her voice trembling with indignation. “He told me to bring my harp.”

Kallessa studied Dovina’s expression. What had the prince done now?

“He offered me tea when I arrived,” Dovina continued, her words tumbling out in a rush. “I was elated, thinking he wanted a private performance. So I played my best pieces, ones no one else has even heard yet. For an hour, I poured my heart into the music.”

She paused, her chest heaving. “And do you know what he did the entire time? He just morosely stared at a portrait over my head, silent as a shadow.”

Kallessa’s brow furrowed. “Maybe he was deeply moved by your playing?”

Dovina scoffed. “He looked awful, too, with dark circles under his eyes. When I finally stopped, he looked at me with those dead gray eyes and said, ‘That is all. You may leave.’ Can you believe it?”

Her cousin’s blue eyes were wide with outrage as she whirled on Kallessa. “I’ve never been so insulted! I’m not some common minstrel to be summoned at his whim. I’m a lady, a peer!” She flung her hands up. “He’s not even my prince. I don’t have to do his bidding.”

Exhausted from her outburst, she sank into a plush chair, flinging her hands out to the sides. “The next time he asks me to play, the answer is no. He is definitely off my potential husband list.”

Kallessa bit her lip. So that’s what the prince had been up to. Discouraging Dovina’s infatuation. But she knew better than to voice that thought. It would only invite more drama.

Just as quickly as she’d deflated, Dovina sprang back to life. She rushed to Kallessa, grasping her hands. “But I did meet the most handsome man yesterday. His name is Warwick. We met in the maze. He and I have the same colored eyes. Can you imagine? And he told me the saddest story about his wife who passed away.” Dovina recounted, her voice tinged with sympathy. “He was so helpful and attentive, making sure I made it out of the maze. A perfect gentleman.” Now her cousin’s eyes were the size of the moon, her cheeks flushed pink.

Kallessa’s jaw dropped momentarily before she recovered. “Warwick Ratliff?”

“Yes. Have you met him?” Dovina asked.

Memories of being repeatedly elbowed in the face flashed through Kallessa's mind. She forced a neutral expression. "We sat near each other at the first dinner party."

"He's a Krithadean dignitary. So, he's titled, close to the crown, and he treated me like the lady that I am." Dovina raised her delicate chin in defiance.

Kallessa felt a little sick to her stomach. What if Warwick really did kill his wife? If she said anything to Dovina, though, her cousin would be indignant, thinking Kallessa was trying to ruin her prospects.

"That's... nice," Kallessa managed. "Do you two have plans for the rest of the festival?"

"He was mistakenly paired with some old crone," Dovina shared. "But since he's close to the queen, he had her change it so we could be together. Isn't that sweet? Maybe I'll marry him. That will teach the prince."

Kallessa took a deep breath, knowing she'd regret her next words. "You're only seventeen." Kallessa rested her hand briefly against her cousin's arm. "Why are you in such a hurry to get married? You have plenty of time. Your father is rich. Decisions like this shouldn't be made lightly."

Dovina's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What do you know about relationships? The only man you were ever involved with tossed you away like yesterday's trash when he found out you were no longer an heir."

Kallessa dropped her hand, the words hitting her like a slap across the face.

Dovina glared at her. "I don't know why I thought you'd be happy for me. You're just a bitter old harpy. It's fine for you to be engaged, but not me? If it weren't for me bringing you here, you'd still be at Aunt Gevene's, dusting her stupid smelling salt collection!"

It was true.

Kallessa reached out, trying to salvage the situation. "Wait, cousin. I am thankful—"

Dovina dismissed her words with a wave. "Just forget it," she retorted, storming out of the room and slamming the door behind her.

Great, now her cousin might be the one engaged to the murderer.

Was this all worth it? Her life had been so simple just days ago. Now she had to juggle so many things, her head was spinning. She was pretending to be engaged to Nevander, a man who drove her to distraction with his mysterious past and alluring presence. Her future and financial security

hung in the balance, dependent on Prince Castien's whims and the success of her split skirts idea. And to top it off, Dovina was acting even more irrational than usual, potentially falling for a man Kallessa suspected of murder. The weight of secrets, lies, and unspoken truths threatened to crush her beneath their combined force.

Enough. Kallessa yanked open her wardrobe. As she donned her split skirts with shaking hands, a sense of urgency filled her. She had to get away from this place—its games, its society, its lies.

Kallessa slipped out through the rear doors of the estate, sidestepping the festival goers who were stirring about. Her feet led her down the path to the stables, a sudden need to feel crisp air on her skin.

There, she found Sunu, a living link to a past she'd thought forever lost. Kallessa's throat tightened as she gazed into the mare's chocolate eyes, framed by long, dark lashes.

"Who owns you now?" she whispered.

Five years. In that time, her mother's prized stock could have scattered to the winds, sold off to countless buyers. Yet here was Sunu, in another country, far away from home. Kallessa's fingers trembled as she caressed the horse's soft mane, and Sunu nuzzled her hand in response.

Blinking back tears, she fished out the carrots she'd pilfered from the breakfast display. Who used food to decorate food, anyway? She fed two to Sunu, savoring the familiar sound of crunching, and pocketed the rest for later.

"Excuse me," she called to a passing stable boy. "Are there horses available for guests?"

The boy's eyes lit up. "Of course, my lady! I'll saddle one up right away."

As he worked, Kallessa explained her need for a regular saddle. When she showed how her split skirts worked, the boy's cheeks flamed red. He ducked his head, focusing intently on patting the golden pony with white patches.

"This is Enola," he mumbled. "She's a sweet one, not known to act up."

Kallessa smiled, offering Enola the remaining carrots. As the pony munched happily, she turned back to the boy. “Thank you. Oh, and... do you have a fishing pole?”

His grin stretched from ear to ear, making his woolen flatcap rise. “You’re my kind of lady, if you don’t mind me saying so. Wait here a moment.”

He returned with a small bamboo pole and a brass-latched wooden box. After confirming she knew the way to the lake, he tipped his hat and hurried off to his next task.

Kallessa mounted Enola, her body remembering the familiar motions. She leaned close, whispering, “Well, girl, let’s escape for a while, shall we?”

As they rode out into the morning, the breeze ruffled Kallessa’s loose hair. No corset constricted her breathing, no ridiculous slippers pinched her toes. Today, she was just Kallessa, a simple girl chasing the promise of a quiet lake and the thrill of a caught fish.

For a few precious hours, she could forget about princes and pretenses. Out here, with only the open sky for company, Kallessa could finally breathe.

He must have a fever.

Nevander’s skin burned despite the chill dawn air gusting through every open window. His eyes, gritty from a sleepless night, felt like sandpaper against his eyelids. The memory of Kallessa’s touch lingered, an electric current coursing through his veins.

After escorting her to her room, he’d fled the suffocating walls of the estate. Shrouded in darkness, he’d prowled the vineyard, haunted the courtyards, and stalked the gardens. Yet no amount of physical exertion could quell the fire she’d ignited within him.

He’d sat in the tub of icy water. Now, as dawn arrived, he stood dripping and half-dressed, staring unseeing at the rising sun. His mind raced, replaying every moment, every touch, every breath shared between them.

A thunderous banging at Kallessa's door jolted him from his reverie. His muscles tensed, ready to storm her room, until he recognized her cousin's shrill voice. Dovina's tirade filtered through the walls, each word stoking Nevander's simmering anger. When the door slammed shut minutes later, he forced himself to unclench his fists.

If Dovina had been his charge, he would have had her thrashed for speaking to Kallessa in such a manner.

No. He couldn't afford to think that way. He couldn't develop any further feelings for Kallessa.

Ten minutes later, Kallessa's door quietly opened, then closed.

Nevander ran a hand through his damp hair. He bloody well wasn't going to stay in his room all day. He could at least go find her and see how she was doing. If only to keep up appearances.

With renewed purpose, he dressed quickly and set out to find her. The staff and stable hands, after some coaxing, revealed she'd gone riding to the lake. Suddenly, that sounded like the most perfect place to be. The day was calm, the sun beginning to chase the chill away.

Sneaking into the kitchens, he convinced the cook to pack him a basket for a lakeside picnic. He ignored the odd looks, suspecting that at least one or two of them knew who he was. But thankfully, the staff didn't gossip with society, so he was safe. For now.

Could he possibly last the rest of the festival without being outed as the prince of Dracia? More importantly, could he bear to let Kallessa go when this masquerade inevitably ended? With each step towards the lake, the answers to these questions seemed both more urgent and more impossible to face.

Enola plunged her muzzle into the lake and Kallessa dismounted with a soft thud, her boots sinking slightly into the damp earth. She wrapped Enola's reins around a nearby tree, patting the pony's flank affectionately.

The lake stretched before her, a vast kidney-shaped expanse surrounded by cypress and willows. Wisps of mist rose from sunlit patches, creating an ethereal dance on the water's surface. Kallessa inhaled deeply, the scent of

cool water and mossy ground filling her lungs. For a moment, she could almost believe she was back home, standing by the lake behind her parents' estate.

A cool breeze caressed her cheek, carrying with it the melodious chirping of unseen birds and Enola's occasional soft whinny. Kallessa's shoulders relaxed, the tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying melting away.

She strolled along the lake's edge until she found the perfect log to sit on. Worn smooth by years of use, evidently, others enjoyed the spot too. It offered a perfect vignette of the lake, with soft willows on either side, whispering gently in the breeze.

Kallessa lowered herself onto the log, placing her fishing pole and tackle box beside her. As she began tying the line, memories flooded back—her father's strong hands guiding hers, showing her how to tie the perfect knot. His words echoed in her mind: *You'll never go hungry if you know how to fish.*

A bittersweet smile tugged at her lips as she remembered Blain, her little brother, splashing in the shallows, too impatient for fishing. Just when he'd started to develop the patience for it...

Kallessa swallowed hard, pushing the painful memories aside. She focused instead on looping the line and pulling it tight, and adjusting the floater. Perhaps if Princess Ciana didn't like her split skirt idea, she would just go back to the beach and hire herself as a fisherwoman. She scoffed. Not likely.

But the day was too beautiful for thoughts like that. Opening the wooden box, she saw a small bucket filled with moist soil and wriggling worms.

Without hesitation, she selected one, effortlessly sliding it onto the hook. Adjusting the lead weight on the line, she gently lowered it into the water, allowing her worries to sink to the lake's depths alongside the worm.

Twenty

NEVANDER'S BREATH CAUGHT AS he spotted Kallessa. Gone was the complicated hairdo, fancy dress, and dainty slippered woman he'd known thus far. In her place sat a wood nymph, hunched over a fishing pole on a massive log.

Kallessa looked utterly content, her simple cotton blouse and loose skirts blending seamlessly with the surroundings. Her gaze rested on the water, face relaxed in a way he'd never seen before. Lustrous curls rippled down her back, gently lifted by the morning breeze. Nevander's fingers itched to run through those silken strands.

He stood frozen, drinking in the sight of her. This was Kallessa stripped bare of society's expectations, and she was breathtaking.

Suddenly, she jerked upright, tugging on the pole. A huge grin blossomed on her face as she snatched it upward, pulling a wiggling trout from the water. He wanted to give her a reason to smile at him like that.

As she turned to retrieve the fish from the hook, their eyes met. Her grin faltered, body tensing. Nevander's stomach dropped. He'd intruded on her moment of peace.

He weaved over the tree roots and rocks to her side.

"Not very ladylike, I suppose," she said when he was close enough to see the spots on the trout she'd caught.

Nevander bit back a retort. He didn't care if she liked to fish. For the first time, she looked happy and free, a stark contrast to her usual slightly pained expression.

She'd secured a line to a sapling, which trailed into the water. He pulled up the line where three more glistening trout wriggled on the string. She handed him the fresh trout, and he added it to the others.

"Nice catch," he commented, his voice carrying over the gentle rustling of the last autumn leaves.

Silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken tension. Nevander scrambled for something to say. "I love to fish. You didn't bring along another pole, did you?"

"Afraid not," Kallessa said, her gaze drifting back across the lake.

His chest tightened. He couldn't blame her for being wary after yesterday's heated moment in the library. But seeing her here, shirt bunched at the waist, skirts crumpled and damp, hair tousled around her face—she looked completely unkempt and utterly desirable.

Before he could second-guess himself, he gently took the pole from her fingers and laid it on the ground. Drawing her close, his hands found their way into her glorious hair. Each strand felt like silk, carrying a faint scent of sunshine.

Kallessa's brows drew together, but Nevander's arms tightened, refusing to let go. He needed to lighten the mood, dispel this uneasy tension between them.

"No corset, my lady?" he teased, acutely aware of the warmth of her skin against him.

A flush crept up her neck as she met his gaze. "I am rather fond of breathing," Kallessa replied, her voice breathy despite her attempt at nonchalance. "And I assure you, the fish don't mind."

Nevander chuckled. "How scandalous," he whispered in her ear and felt a tremor race up her spine.

She swallowed. "How did you know where I was?"

Nevander pulled back, offering a crooked smile. "The entire staff knows. First, you stole carrots from the breakfast display, then you chatted with the biggest busybody in the stables."

"I really didn't think anyone would notice the missing carrots," Kallessa said, a hint of sheepishness in her voice.

His grin widened. "They're supposed to be for decoration."

Kallessa tilted her head, her lips quirking. "That's not what the horses thought."

His laughter rang out across the lake, and for a moment, the tension between them eased. But then Kallessa's gaze shifted beyond his shoulder, her eyes widening. She stepped back from him, breaking their embrace.

"Sunu is your horse?" she asked, her voice a mix of wonder and confusion. "How did you get her?"

Nevander's brow furrowed. "My brother bought her about five years ago and gave her to me. How do you know the name of my horse?"

Kallessa's pace was unhurried as she made her way toward the mare. Nevander followed, his mind racing. When Tarrick wasn't getting drunk, he'd developed an obsession with horses and impulsively bought the entire stock from a southern estate auction. It had initially caused quite a stir. Father had been on the verge of a meltdown, but Tarrick surprised them all by successfully breeding and refining the horses, turning them into highly sought-after stock.

"My mother helped with Sunu's birth," Kallessa said softly, sliding her hand across the mare's back. Sunu turned her face toward Kallessa, eyes wide and trusting. "She was breached and struggling. Mother worked through the night to make sure she lived."

Her voice turned contemplative. "The stock has likely been distributed across the entire region by now, I suppose. I never knew who they were sold to."

Nevander watched, trying to piece together the puzzle. There was no doubt this horse knew who Kallessa was. Sunu, typically skittish around strangers, nuzzled Kallessa's palm as if greeting an old friend.

Looking up through the vibrant green canopy, Nevander squinted at the sun. Its golden rays cast a warm glow over the scene, highlighting the softness in Kallessa's expression as she stroked Sunu's neck. "I brought a picnic lunch," he said, gesturing to the basket attached to Sunu's flank. "It seemed like too nice a day to waste indoors. Would you like to eat with me?"

Kallessa hesitated, her hand stilling on Sunu's flank.

"I'll make you a deal," Nevander said, a mischievous glint in his eye. "If you and Sunu win a horse race against me and Enola, we'll even search for those underground tunnels you're so curious about after lunch."

A half-smile crooked Kallessa's lips. The spark of adventure in her eyes told him he'd struck gold.

"You're on," she said, already moving to mount Sunu.

Kallessa's laughter rang out across the valley, the sound making Nevander grin. She and Sunu were a vision as they cleared a narrow hedgerow, rider and horse moving as one.

There was no way he could have beaten her, not riding Enola. His niece Wynna's pony was a fat, spoiled thing that had been snuck far too many sugar cubes. But he couldn't share that information with Kallessa. Blast this deception.

He pushed it aside and trotted behind, reveling in the freedom of the fresh air and the captivating sight of the woman before him. Later, he would deal with that later.

As they rode into the vineyard, he whistled and pointed to the western horizon where a copse of trees gathered.

She whipped her head around and barreled toward it, her hair streaming behind her like a banner, catching the sunlight and turning to liquid fire.

Stunning.

As he caught up to her, Kallessa was already dismounting, her movements fluid and graceful. Her cheeks were flushed, her radiant smile alight with renewed vigor. It was obvious she loved to ride, and she was magnificent at it. A natural.

"I win," she teased, her eyes dancing. "Now, where are the tunnels?"

Nevander chuckled, swinging down from Enola's back. "Don't you even want to eat lunch first?" he asked, gesturing to the picnic basket still secured to his saddle.

Her lips twitched. His windswept little tart. He wanted to kiss that look right off her face.

Instead, he cleared his throat. "I said we would *look* for the tunnels, remember?" Nevander said, forcing himself to focus. "I don't know where they are."

Kallessa's eyes remained alight with curiosity, but after a moment's consideration, she nodded. "I suppose I am hungry," she admitted. "And it wouldn't be good to explore on an empty stomach."

“Oh, thank goodness we raced before we ate lunch,” Kallessa said, her hand sliding over her waist. Nevander’s gaze followed, heat rising in his chest. He imagined his own fingers tracing that path, feeling her warmth through the fabric.

“What’s your favorite pie?” he asked, desperate to distract himself.

They lounged under a swaying willow tree on a hay scented blanket from the stables, bellies full from the earthy warmth of quiche and fresh rye bread, generously slathered with butter. They’d passed a jar of preserved peaches between them, their forks piercing the flesh with a satisfying give, the sweet, candied fragrance mingling with the autumn air.

“Rhubarb. It’s sweet and tart and stains everything it touches.” Kallessa smiled. “What’s yours?” She leaned against the tree trunk, her legs crossed, her skirts spread around her. She looked like a wildflower, unrefined and natural.

The royal kitchens were always overflowing with decadent treats, but only when the ships came in from Reykia, laden with exotic produce, did he get his favorite.

“Mango.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Mango pie? I’ve never heard of it.” A gentle breeze teased the edge of the blanket, and she held it down with her empty glass.

“You being from further south, I thought you’d have tried it.” He really would have to visit Teansong in the future. After all, it was one of his provinces.

She smoothed a hand across her ruffled skirt. “I’ve eaten mango, but not in a pie.” Her eyebrows pinched for only a moment. “My mother loved Reykian fruits, she missed them from her childhood. So every chance my father had, we had something from the tropics.”

“Your mother is from Reykia?”

“Yes.” The single word held a wealth of emotion.

That explained her exotic dark eyes and hair. Reykia, a tropical island south of the mainland, was known for its beauty, both in landscape and people.

“My mother is from Telarith.” As tradition dictated, his parents’ marriage had been arranged for a treaty and trading right between the two countries. A sense of unease spread through him. That’s what Ciana and Dane’s arranged marriage was supposed to ensure. Peace between kingdoms.

Yet, look how that had turned out. Would he be next? The thought threatened to sour his stomach.

“And your father?” Kallessa asked, oblivious to his inner turmoil.

Nevander hesitated, a half-truth perched on his tongue, the bitter taste of it mixing with the tang of white grape juice that lingered on his lips. His father was the bloody king. King Oren Lionskye had not a drop of foreign blood in his veins. “He is from Dracia, actually a long lineage from the region.”

Kallessa’s skirts rustled softly as she repositioned, her gaze fixed with a childlike curiosity. “How many siblings do you have?”

“I’m proudly the youngest of four rowdy, annoying children that my mother is always lamenting.” If he told her the names of his siblings, would she recognize them? That nagging guilt twinged his insides, making the sunny day a bit dimmer.

Instead, he turned the questions to her and smiled, hoping his eyes looked inviting and open. “So, Lady Kallessa, what is your family like?”

Kallessa slid a blade of golden grass between her fingers, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. She looked up at him with an unfathomable expression on her face.

Then she stood abruptly, brushing the grass from her skirts. “Do we have time to look for the tunnels?”

The sudden change of subject was jarring. What was she hiding? His conversation with Castien the previous day came to mind. His friend had urged him to find out more about his ‘fiancée.’ But how could he pry without revealing his own deceptions?

“If I were to build a tunnel,” he said carefully as they packed up their things and mounted their horses, “I’d start somewhere remote, rarely visited. What do you think?”

But Kallessa wasn’t listening. She stared across the horizon, lost in thought. A lone cloud veiled the sun, casting a shadow that cooled the vibrant day and darkened her golden eyes to the shade of old amber.

When she spoke, her voice sounded distant, unlike the woman he’d spent the last few hours with. “I know we aren’t really engaged, and most likely I won’t ever see you again after this, but I must know something.” Her question hung suspended in the air, laden with the weight of stones skimmed across a still pond. “Can I trust you?”

His thoughts stumbled. He'd been thinking about his own deception mere minutes ago. But even though he wasn't being forthright, oh heck, who was he kidding, he was outright lying about who he was, he would never break her confidence. Whatever she told him would stay between them. He owed her that much.

He slowed Enola, riding beside her. "Of course." He responded smoothly, praying that none of the tumult in his mind spilled out.

She glanced away, her lips tightening, and she drew in a breath. "When I go home from the festival, it will be back to my aunt's cottage in Teansong." She pushed a strand of hair that blew into her face. "That's where I live now. I am her housekeeper and cook, companion and niece. Once upon a time, I was a lady, but now," A storm darkened in the depths of her eyes. "I am no one."

Nevander's insides grew still. "Stop right there."

Startled, Kallessa did so.

"A lady is not defined by her name or her lineage," Nevander said, his tone gentle yet firm. "She's a lady because she carries herself with dignity, grace, and strength of spirit." He thought of the vapid noblewomen he'd known, their titles as empty as their heads. "Trust me, I've known plenty of women who have the title and don't deserve it."

A battle played out on Kallessa's soft face as different expressions flitted by before she settled on one.

For the first time, there was a glitter of hardness in her eyes.

"Then why, when my parents died, did I lose everything?"

Nevander's nostrils flared. "Tell me more."

The freedom of riding Sunu, as if that was still her life, was gone. In its place was a brutal reminder of her reality, which was a far cry from this opulence and privilege.

She was so tired of lying about her identity. Nevander already knew the truth about her nonexistent engagement, so she wouldn't have to maintain that charade with him. What if she just told him? A simple ship builder's son wouldn't judge her, would he?

Their horses were at a standstill, facing the lake again. But that serenity was broken. She didn't care about the stupid tunnels. They'd only been a distraction, anyway.

She took a deep breath. "Five years ago, my entire world shattered in an instant."

Nevander dismounted, then helped her down from Sunu. He spread the picnic blanket beside the lake and gestured for her to sit. He sat down, facing her, his hand rested gently on her ankle.

"Tell me," he said softly.

Kallessa studied his steady gaze. Strength radiated from those eyes the color of spring grasses. And in them, she saw something that allowed her to free the thoughts that plagued her every day. "It was a carriage accident. My father, mother, and little brother Blain..." her voice faltered for a moment before she continued, "all perished when it careened off the cliff at Whisperwind Pass." She'd never shared this story, not really. Everyone in her former life already knew. The words felt foreign on her tongue. "They said the connection between the carriage and the horses came loose around the bend, causing them to lose control."

So many times, she'd taken her own horse, a chestnut mare named Iona her father had given her for her 12th birthday, to that treacherous pass, trying to understand what had happened. The remnants of the gilded carriage lay hundreds of feet below, a tiny dot of gold and amber against the sheer rock face, smashed to a thousand pieces. Her family, all that she cared about in the world, dust and bones. Unreachable.

She couldn't give them a proper burial. Now, with Iona gone, she couldn't even visit the accident site. Aunt Gevene's old mare, a swaybacked gray named Daisy, wasn't strong enough to travel that far into the mountains. Five long years of agonizing questions, of wondering if she could have done something.

Or would she be dead now, too, her body broken on the rocks below?

"They were returning from the Vaston music festival in the capital. We used to go every year. Normally I'd have been with them, but we'd had a fight, and I'd refused to go."

She'd been so young and stupid. All over a boy. Her voice trembled as she continued. "I didn't even say goodbye to them." She swallowed hard. "I just left a note and went to Aunt Gevene's. If I'd only known…"

She blinked, directing her misty gaze to the sky. Storm clouds gathered on the western horizon, a chill creeping into the late autumn air. She unrolled her sleeves, buttoning the cuffs for warmth.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from the racing clouds. "My father crafted the finest carriages in Dracia. Even the royal house commissioned them. He was the best driver I knew. I just don't understand what went wrong."

A long silence followed her words, and she turned back to Nevander. His expression was unreadable, his eyes intensely focused on the horizon.

A pang of hurt pierced her. She'd just bared her soul. The least he could do was pay attention. "Nevander, are you even listening to me?"

The question hung in the air between them. Kallessa held her breath, suddenly terrified of his response. What if she'd revealed too much? What if he saw her differently now?

His eyes snapped to hers, filled with an emotion she couldn't quite name. He opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. Kallessa's heart pounded in her ears as she waited for his response, the weight of her revelation pressing down on her chest.

An eerie sense of déjà vu washed over Nevander as Kallessa's story unfolded. Her words blurred with fragmented memories from the war, creating a disorienting tapestry of past and present. The carriage accident after the music festival... He'd been there that year, hadn't he? Twenty-one and brimming with youthful arrogance.

The festival flashed before his eyes: vibrant lanterns swaying in the breeze, the intoxicating blend of ale and roasted meats, laughter mingling with music, and girls twirling in flowing dresses. But something darker lurked beneath the surface of these memories, a nagging whisper he couldn't quite grasp.

"Nevander?" Kallessa's voice cut through his reverie, laced with concern.

He blinked, forcing himself back to the present. "I'm sorry, please continue. What made you so angry that you refused to go with your family?"

Kallessa's jaw clenched, her eyes clouding with a mix of embarrassment and old pain. "What it always is when you're young and stupid, I suppose. A young man." She paused, twisting a blade of grass between her fingers. "Actually, a poet."

Nevander's breath caught in his throat, an inexplicable dread creeping up his spine.

"I was so infatuated," Kallessa continued, her voice barely above a whisper. "I couldn't see past the flowery words and grand gestures. When he asked my father for my hand and he refused, I was furious. I didn't understand why. Tynan seemed perfect."

The name punched Nevander in the chest. "Tynan," he repeated, his mouth suddenly dry. "Tynan Respa?"

Kallessa's eyes snapped to his, widening in surprise. "You know him?"

Of course he did. The famous Dracian poet, renowned across the kingdom for his romantic verses that made young ladies swoon.

But it wasn't Tynan's poetry that Nevander remembered. His heart ratcheted into his throat as a memory, sharp as a razor blade, sliced its way back to the present from the depth of the war. A confession whispered in Tynan's final moments, a secret Nevander had kept buried for years.

"Kallessa," he said, his voice low and urgent. He grasped her hands, not caring if his touch was too rough. "What is your family name?"

She tried to pull away, but he held firm. "My family is gone," she whispered, pain etched across her face.

"Please," Nevander insisted, his heart pounding. "I need to know."

Thunder rumbled in the distance as storm clouds gathered overhead, mirroring the tumult in Nevander's mind. A gust of wind scattered leaves across their picnic blanket, carrying the scent of impending rain.

Kallessa searched his face, confusion and fear battling in her eyes. Finally, she spoke, her voice barely audible over the rustling trees. "Wynlar. My real name is Kallessa Wynlar."

The world tilted on its axis. Puzzle pieces Nevander didn't even know existed slammed into place with brutal clarity. He released Kallessa's hands as if burned, stumbling to his feet.

Twenty-One

NEVANDER'S FINGERS SCREAMED WITH cold as he folded back the battered canvas tent flap. Frigid mountain wind knifed through countless tears in the fabric, whistling into their makeshift shelter. Rows of cots lined the tent, each a small island of agony. Moans and vacant stares filled the air, blending with the haunting wind and distant battle.

One voice rose above the chaos. "Prince Nevander, please. It's urgent."

Nevander wove his way to the cot, each step on the frozen ground sending shockwaves of pain through his body. If he ever made it back home, he'd never take warmth for granted again. His fingertips, almost translucent, warned of imminent frostbite, but he pushed past the meager warmth of the central brazier. Duty demanded his presence, and he would not forsake his men's dying pleas.

Blood and fluids had soaked through the bandages wound tightly around the soldier's torso. Nevander's stomach clenched. He recognized him, Tynan Respa, who had fought with a ferocity few could match. But Tynan wouldn't be going home.

When their eyes met, Tynan gripped Nevander's arm with the intensity of a man whose strength was being held by sheer will. "My prince," he rasped, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Each cough filled the air with the metallic scent of blood, mingling with the sterile odor of the medic's potions.

Nevander dismissed the hovering medic and perched on the cot's edge. "I'm here," he whispered, covering Tynan's trembling hand with his own.

“Proud... to fight beside you,” Tynan managed, his brown curls matted with sweat despite the cold. “To do something worthy... if only for once.”

Nevander hated this. He despised this war, every blood-soaked second of it. These moments, bearing witness to young men’s last words, were the worst. Yet he swallowed his anguish, offering what little comfort he could. “You were brave, lad. Well done.”

Tynan’s face contorted, his features twisted by the agony that coursed through his body. He took a shuddering breath. “I have to tell you something. I can’t... can’t carry this burden to the grave. It’s caused too much damage.”

Nevander’s brow furrowed, his grip tightening. “Go on.”

“There was a girl,” Tynan whispered, barely audible above the distant cannon fire.

Of course, there was always a girl.

“Her name was Kallessa Wynlar. I wanted her. Not just for her title and wealth. She was... beautiful. I am a poet, you see. I’m drawn to pretty things.” Tynan’s shoulder lifted in a resigned shrug. “I didn’t love her, but I made her fall for me. She was only seventeen. So young. So gullible.”

Unease coiled in Nevander’s gut.

Tynan continued, each word a struggle. “I was used to getting everything I wanted with my charm and wit. Even the queen adored my writings. Yet Kallessa’s father refused my proposal for marriage. No matter what I did, he refused.”

He paused, arms curling protectively around his stomach. A moan escaped his lips, his body convulsing. When his eyes opened again, they held a terrifying clarity.

“When they arrived at the Vaston music festival without Kallessa, I confronted her father,” Tynan’s voice filled with bitter resentment. “Taeral dismissed me, warned me to never to inquire after his daughter again. The rage... it consumed me. I hatched a plan to embarrass the carriage designer to royalty. Who did he think he was to refuse me?”

Tynan’s gaze locked onto Nevander’s, feverish intensity burning in his dark eyes. “During the festival, I slipped away. Sabotaged their carriage. Cut the ties, just enough to go unnoticed.”

His voice faltered, anguish spilling forth in a gut-wrenching cry that left him gasping. Nevander felt the eyes of nearby soldiers turn towards them, but he couldn’t look away from Tynan’s tormented face.

“I only meant to embarrass them,” Tynan confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. “To teach them not to treat Tynan Respa like a commoner. I never meant—I never wanted—” His words hung in the air, like an arrow hovering at its peak before descending to strike.

Tears welled up, tracing grey trails down his dirt-streaked face. “Oh Kallessa, I’m so sorry. So sorry.”

Nevander leaned closer, his heart pounding. “What happened?”

“The carriage broke loose at Whisperwind pass,” Tynan explained, his voice a mix of anguish and guilt. “It went over the cliff. All three of them... dead. Kallessa, left without a family. Her uncle took over, kicked her out.”

His features contorted, voice growing raspy. “I ruined her. All out of spite,” he whispered. “The guilt... I couldn’t stand it. Never contacted her again. Never wrote another word. My muse abandoned me. When the war started, I joined. Hoping to escape my deeds. To do something right, for once.”

His eyes closed, face slackening. For a moment, Nevander thought he was gone. But with a sudden jolt, Tynan snapped back, eyes wide with determination.

“Please, my prince,” he pleaded, desperation filling his voice. “Find her. Tell her I’m sorry. It was never her fault. Tell her... tell her I begged for forgiveness with my last breath. That she was always too good for me.”

With those final words, his dark brown eyes fluttered closed, his body shuddered, and he lay still, his last breath leaving him in a long, cold exhale. The vise like grip Tynan had kept around Nevander’s arm loosened, then fell back to the blood-soaked cot in finality. The weight of his confession lingered in the icy air, adding another burden to Nevander’s already heavy heart.

“Nevander?” Kallessa’s voice quavered, her eyes searching his face.

The weight of Tynan’s confession, long buried in the depths of his war-torn memories, pressed down on Nevander. His chest tightened as he wrestled with how to tell her. As a captain, he’d witnessed countless deaths,

heard innumerable last words of longing and regret. But this... this was different.

Kallessa began to rise, her movements stiff and guarded. Panic flared in Nevander's chest. He couldn't let her leave, not like this. In a desperate move, he reached for her arm, pulling her onto his lap as he sank back to the ground.

"Wait," he pleaded, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Just... stay. Please."

She stilled against him, her body tense. Could she feel his heart beating wildly? He pressed his chin against the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her hair, trying to draw strength from her presence.

"Tynan Respa is dead," he finally managed, the words hanging heavy in the air between them.

Her head snapped around, locking eyes with him. "How do you know this?" she whispered.

Nevander swallowed hard. "I was there. At the battle of Narian. He was... he was one of my soldiers."

Kallessa's brows furrowed, her lips parting as if to speak, though no words came. He could see it, the seismic shift in those tawny eyes. An entire lifetime, rearranged in a single moment.

But there was more, so much more she didn't know. Nevander's stomach churned.

He'd held grieving mothers' hands as they raged at him for letting their sons die. He'd seen grown men fall to their knees as they gripped the letter that spelled the end to their progeny. But he'd never had to tell a woman that her family's death was the result of one man's pride.

"I never knew," she murmured, her gaze dropping as the color drained from her face. Then, confusion creasing her brow, she looked up at him again. "He joined the war? That doesn't sound like him at all."

Nevander tightened his grip on her hands, feeling the softness of her skin against his calloused palms. "I don't think it was his plan," he admitted. "But he mentioned you. At the end."

Her eyes widened. "He did? What… what did he say?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Nevander's throat constricted. "He begged for your forgiveness."

"But why?" Her voice was like a knife to his heart.

Such innocence, such sweetness. About to be crushed by him. He pulled her closer, as if he could somehow shield her from the truth with his body.

She didn’t resist, too stunned by his words to do anything but cling to him.

Nevander took a deep breath, steeling himself for what he had to say next. The words, when they came, felt like shards of glass in his mouth.

“Kallessa, he... he sabotaged your parents’ carriage.”

He sabotaged your parents’ carriage. The words ricocheted through Kallessa’s mind, a cacophony of nonsense and terrible clarity. It had never been an accident.

Sabotage.

Her lungs constricted, each breath a battle. “Tynan... sabotaged their carriage?” The name tasted like ash on her tongue.

Nevander’s reply came as if from a great distance, muffled by the roaring in her ears. “He claimed he never meant to do any harm, only teach them a lesson.”

Kallessa jerked away from him, sparks dancing at the edges of her vision. A gust of wind whipped her hair across her face, its icy fingers raising goosebumps on her skin. She stumbled to her feet, nearly upending the picnic basket in her haste.

“My family is dead because he wanted to teach them a lesson?” The words clawed their way out of her throat, raw and primal. Her knees buckled, and she doubled over, a keening wail tearing from her chest. “My family is dead!”

The truth crashed over her like a tidal wave, threatening to drag her under. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Nevander’s eyes, filled with pity, bore into her, and she couldn’t stand it. She had to escape.

“I must go. I’m sorry.” The words tumbled out, barely coherent.

She bolted, leaving Nevander calling her name. Or was it just the wind? She couldn’t tell, and it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except putting distance between herself and the crushing weight of this revelation.

Her feet pounded the earth, stumbling over roots and stones. Branches whipped at her face and arms, but she barely felt the sting. Sunu’s worried whinny pierced through her fog, and Kallessa changed course. That placid

little pony couldn't give her what she needed now. She needed speed, needed to outrun the truth nipping at her heels.

Kallessa vaulted onto Sunu's back, her fingers tangling in the horse's mane. She dug her heels in, and Sunu responded instantly, sensing her rider's desperation. They tore across the meadow, hooves thundering, kicking up clods of earth and grass.

"Mother, Father, Blain," Kallessa choked out, burying her face in Sunu's mane. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks, quickly cooling in the rushing wind. "I miss you so much!"

She surrendered herself to the gallop, willing her mind to go blank. No thoughts, just the pounding of hooves, the rush of wind, the burn in her muscles. Anything to drown out the echoes of Nevander's words.

They rode for what felt like hours, careening through fields and wooded trails. The landscape blurred around them, a smear of greens and browns giving way to orderly rows of bare vines. They had reached the estate's vineyard.

Sunu slowed to a canter, then a trot, picking her way carefully along the paths between the rows. Most of the grapes had been harvested, leaving only a few wizened raisins clinging stubbornly to the vines. A gust of wind sent a handful of golden and russet leaves skittering across their path.

The sky had darkened ominously since they'd left the lake. Sunu's ears flicked back and forth, her steps growing more restless as she sensed the impending storm. The air crackled with electricity, carrying the rich, earthy scent of damp soil from the vineyard.

As they neared the edge of the vineyard, an unexpected clearing came into view. From a distance, it could easily be missed, tucked away just beyond the next rise. It faced west, offering a breathtaking panorama of rolling hills and distant peaks crowned with early snow. At the center stood a majestic onyx memorial, its dark surface a stark contrast to the vases overflowing with golden sunflowers and blood-red roses flanking it. A solitary bench of rose granite stood sentinel before it.

Drawn by an inexplicable pull, Kallessa dismounted. Her legs trembled, muscles protesting after the punishing ride. She let Sunu graze among the soft grasses while she approached the memorial on unsteady feet.

Even in the fading light, the intricate carvings were mesmerizing. Kallessa's fingers traced the engraved words, finding the stone cold and unyielding beneath her touch.

Prince Dane Ravenbluff
Husband and Father
Krithadea mourns her Son

A lump formed in her throat. He'd been only twenty-eight when he died. Just six years older than she was now. The epitaph seemed woefully inadequate for the heir to the throne. Where was the mention of his parents? His brother, Prince Castien? There were no clues here how he died, but the immaculate condition of the memorial spoke volumes about someone's devotion.

The intricate carvings encircling the writing drew Kallessa's gaze. Two ravens with outstretched wings, their bodies intertwined in a spiraling grapevine. The birds never quite touched, frozen in an eternal dance amidst leaves and grapes captured in exquisite detail.

She took a step back, her legs giving way as she sank onto the bench. From here, Prince Dane had a front-row seat to every sunset from now until eternity, his memorial facing the vast western sky.

The cold granite seeped through the thin fabric of her skirts, sending a shiver up her spine. As she sat there, gazing at the grave of a young man who'd been destined to be king, alone on this windswept knoll, a crushing realization washed over her.

Her family lay at the bottom of an unreachable ravine, their lives snuffed out in an instant. And they had nothing. No marker, no place for her to visit, to remember, to mourn.

After their deaths, her life had become a blur of grief and loss. Uprooted from her home, stripped of her status, cast adrift. And she'd been existing, not living, in a state of numb denial, drifting from one day to the next.

How was she honoring her family by this shadowy existence? Is this what her mother would have wanted for her? Her father? Even Blain?

No.

As the sharp wind rustled through the leaves, she felt a stirring within her, as if she had finally awakened from a long slumber. Uncle Talos may have taken away her physical home, but he would no longer crush her spirit.

It was time for change. She would honor her family's memory. She would make changes when she returned to Teansong.

She was tired of being a shadow.

Returning to the stables, Kallessa slid from Sunu's back, her legs trembling with exhaustion and emotion. "Thank you, Sunu. Mama would be so proud of you." The words caught in her throat as thoughts of her mother intertwined with the bitter revelation about Tynan. His face, with those moody dark eyes and unruly curls that she'd always adored, now belonged to a villain.

The air grew heavy with an impending storm as she walked the winding path from the stables back to the grand estate. She slipped in through a side door, grateful to avoid the bustling crowds of the evening's festivities.

The thought of donning a mask of serenity and playing the part of a proper lady made her stomach churn. Her body ached from riding, her eyes swollen and raw. All she craved was the solace of a hot bath, to wash away the day's revelations, along with the dust and sweat.

Yet, as she entered the warm hallways, an invisible force tugged at her, drawing her inexorably towards the library. She hesitated at the threshold, memories of Nevander's kiss in the hidden nook flooding back. A surge of raw emotion quickly overpowered the bittersweet nostalgia.

Inside, the once-cold fireplace now roared with life, casting dancing shadows across the room. Kallessa marched to the shelf where the slim green tome of Tynan's poetry sat, mocking her with its innocuous presence. She slid it out, its weight a leaden reminder of shattered dreams and bitter truths.

With trembling fingers, she flipped to page 34, where her once-favorite poem resided. The words blurred before her eyes, but she didn't need to read them. They were etched into her soul, each line now holding a meaning it never held before, revealing the real man behind them. She slid her fingers across the fine paper to the top, separating the page from the others.

Slowly, she tore the page, savoring the severing of sheet from binding, ripping it from its home, like Tynan had ripped her away from hers. Once freed, she crumpled it tightly in her fist and with a vehement motion, she hurled it into the flames.

A small grin crept upon her lips, a rush of exhilaration coursing through her veins as the flames hungrily consumed the words she once held so dear. One by one, she tore the pages from the book and tossed them into the fire, each page curling and blackening before turning to ash, just as her last vestiges of feelings for a man she hadn't really known burned with them. Finally, she held only the binding, and she wrenched it back and forth, trying to rip it in half, but it wouldn't give. In a fit of exasperation, she flung the remnants into the flames, her chest heaving with a mixture of exhaustion and a lingering sense of madness.

"That was one of mother's favorite books," a voice spoke behind her, startling her from her frenzy.

Kallessa whirled around to find Prince Castien standing there, one eyebrow raised.

She knew she should apologize, or curtsy, or something, but in that moment, she didn't have it in her. In that moment, she was free.

Instead, she pointed to the fire. "That *coward* murdered my family," she said, her voice as cold as the snow-capped mountains outside the window.

"Did he now?" The prince's voice was low, calm, a stark contrast to the storm swirling within Kallessa.

She turned back to the fire, her heartbeat still pounding. The room fell into a hushed stillness, broken only by the mournful wail of the wind seeping through the chimney and the crackling of the flames.

Struggling to match the prince's composure, she spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "I thought I loved him once. I dreamed we would be happy together." She let out a bitter laugh. "What a fool I was."

Prince Castien joined her by the fire, his hands outstretched towards the dancing flames, his wool jacket and heavy trousers insulating him from the cold.

"Many people believe the purpose of life is to pursue happiness," he remarked, glancing at her with tired eyes that flickered against the orange glow. "But they're mistaken. If happiness ever finds you, it will leave you just as quickly, like a drunken lover, or a perhaps… a fickle poet."

He paused for a moment before continuing. "Do you want to know the meaning of life?"

Taken aback by the abrupt shift in conversation, Kallessa hesitated before replying, "Yes."

“So do I.” Bitterness etched across his features as he stared into the flames. “But I know one thing it isn’t. Letting the dead rule us from the grave.” He turned to face her, his eyes intense. “They’re gone to rest in peace or whatever the dead do, yet they leave behind these messes for us. The dead are always going about, mucking it up for the rest of us, aren’t they?”

Kallessa let out a surprised scoff. “I guess they are.”

Rain tapped more insistently against the windows. Kallessa had seen the bruised clouds outside; this was merely a harbinger of the storm to come. Had Nevander made it back? Would he even want to see her after this?

Castien retrieved a linen handkerchief from his pocket, offering it to her. The scent of his cologne mixed with the faint smell of smoke from the fire. He waved his hand about in a circular manner. “Your face is a bit of a wreck.”

She let out something between a cry and a laugh and took it from him, dabbing at her eyes. “I bet all the ladies swoon with lines like that, my lord.”

Castien heaved a breath and released it. “You’d be surprised what royalty can get away with. One of the few perks.”

He gave a mock bow. “I do come bearing good news. Princess Ciana will be here next week, and I’ll tell her of your ridiculous riding skirt idea. I promise you, she will seek you out.”

Kallessa’s heart leapt. Could it really be that simple? She’d been so focused on the pain of the past, she’d almost forgotten the possibility of a brighter future.

“Thank you, my lord. I will be forever grateful for any assistance you can provide.” And if the princess didn’t like her idea, she would find another way, somehow. She would escape her uncle’s iron grip and forge her own path.

Castien gazed at her thoughtfully. “Is it really that bad, my lady?” he asked gently.

“What do you mean?” Kallessa replied, caught off guard by the prince’s perception.

“I make it my business to know the background of every person who visits my estate, Lady Kallessa Wynlar.”

She glanced at him sharply. How much did he know about her family circumstances?

Prince Castien held up his hands in a reassuring gesture. “Don’t worry, I am a master at keeping secrets. Your history is safe with me.”

Kallessa didn’t know how comfortable she felt with the foreign prince knowing her life story. It would make her feel better if she knew even one small thing about him.

So she turned to the prince and gauged his face, his pale skin warming to golden in the firelight. “My lord, may I ask a question?”

He nodded once.

Her thoughts drifted back to the lonely grave in the vineyard that faced the vast expanse of western sky. That massive memorial to a prince who would never be king.

“What happened to your brother?”

Castien’s eyes narrowed, a muscle twitching in his jaw as he stared into the fire. It seemed a thousand lifetimes came and went before he answered, his voice a mere murmur. “Remember what I said about the dead mucking it up for the rest of us?”

“Yes.”

His eyes finally broke their contest with the fire, turning their icy intensity upon her instead. “Dane takes the grand prize,” he said bitterly.

With that, he spun on his heels and left her alone, holding his handkerchief in her hand.

Twenty-Two

NEVANDER LED ENOLA BACK to the stables, his footsteps as heavy as his heart. The sky darkened overhead, mirroring the tumult in his mind.

He'd let Kallessa go. She deserved space to process without his presence muddying the waters. But had he done the right thing? The weight of his vow to Tynan pressed down on him, a burden finally lifted, yet it left him hollow.

Rain began to fall, fat droplets splattering against his skin. He barely noticed.

Before today, Tynan's story had been just another tragic tale from the war, one of countless soldiers breathing their last. Now, it pulsed with new life. Kallessa was no longer a faceless victim but a vibrant, complex woman he was growing to... what? Care for? Admire? His chest tightened at the thought.

Enola tugged at her reins, eager for the shelter of the stables and the promise of treats. Nevander smiled despite himself. Some things never changed. Wynna had spoiled this pony rotten years ago.

Wynna. Another pang shot through him. She and Kallessa would get along famously, both possessing that rare blend of sweetness and wit. The thought of introducing them sent a jolt of longing through him, chased by a wave of guilt. How could he even entertain such notions?

As he neared the stables, his mind raced. Who had claimed Kallessa's estate after her family's death? Castien would know–in fact, Nevander was

certain the prince had known Kallessa's true identity all along. His jaw clenched. Why hadn't Castien said anything?

Was she truly destitute? It hardly seemed so. But if she was, he would fix it. He was a damn prince, wasn't he? What good was that power and wealth if he couldn't improve at least one person's life?

No matter what he discovered, he would ensure Kallessa never felt destitute again. Even if she hated him after this. Even if she hated him after she learned the truth about who he really was.

The failed prince.

As he handed Enola over to a waiting stable hand, the heavens truly opened. Rain lashed down, stripping the last leaves from the trees and drenching him in seconds.

Nevander stood there, letting the cold water soak through his clothes. Part of him wanted to stay, to let the rain wash away his sins, his secrets, his very identity. But he couldn't. Not yet.

Kallessa craved silence. A melancholy shroud enveloped her as she dragged a chair before the library's fireplace and slumped into it. It wasn't particularly cold, but she needed the comfort of fire, something to soothe her.

She stared at the door Prince Castien had exited through, but it wasn't her home to shut doors, as much as she wanted to. What was she going to do for the rest of the evening? Sulk? No, she was tired of brooding. As she stared into the dancing flames, an epiphany struck her with the force of a thunderbolt.

She hadn't caused her parents' deaths.

The realization left her breathless. Had she been silently shouldering this blame all along, allowing that weight to crush her?

The library door creaked, startling Kallessa out of her thoughts. Nevander strode in, his hair and clothes drenched from the raging downpour outside. His eyes, filled with concern, immediately sought her out.

Kallessa sprang to her feet, hastily clearing her throat of emotions. She'd just run off and left him in the rain. Some companion she was. He'd

probably think twice before inviting her on another picnic. “You’re soaked through,” she said, extending her hand. “Come, dry out by the fire before you catch your death.”

Instead of heeding her suggestion, Nevander closed the distance between them in a few long strides. Before Kallessa could utter another word, his powerful arms encircled her, pulling her against his damp shirt. She stiffened initially, his wet shirt icy against her. But his embrace seeped through her resistance like the sun’s rays melting a layer of frost.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, his warm breath stirring the loose strands of her hair. “About today, about everything you’ve endured.” A shiver coursed down her spine that had nothing to do with the chill of his rain-soaked clothing.

Kallessa’s hands pressed against his chest, torn between pushing him away to maintain propriety and surrendering to the comfort he offered. Instead, they stilled there, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath her fingertips.

Was it possible that he truly understood? That he could see the loneliness she'd hidden for so long? It wasn't possible.

She gently pulled away, forcing a smile. “Would you like to sit by the fire with me for a while?”

Nevander nodded, his eyes never leaving hers as they settled into chairs before the hearth. The crackling flames filled the silence between them, a comforting backdrop to the unspoken words that hung in the air. What was he thinking? His clothes were nearly dry before he turned to her.

His eyes, usually so guarded, held a warmth that made her breath catch. “I want to give Sunu to you,” he said softly. “She likes you better, anyway. And you two look magnificent together, like you were meant to be.” A playful smile danced across his lips. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t help admiring how you rode her this afternoon. The way you moved together was like poetry.”

Kallessa gasped. “You are giving Sunu to me? Truly?” She could scarcely believe the words. Surely, she’d misheard him over the pounding of her own pulse.

“Yes.”

In that moment, a tiny piece of Kallessa’s fractured soul stitched itself back together. The thought of Sunu belonging to her once more, a living reminder of happier times, made her eyes sting with unshed tears. “Thank

you," she managed to say around the lump forming in her throat. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"Maybe I don't," Nevander replied, his expression inscrutable in the flickering firelight. "Maybe one day you can help me understand."

As he tossed another log onto the fire, Kallessa realized how surprisingly easy his companionship felt. Unlike Dovina's exhausting whirlwind of activity or the constant worry that plagued her when caring for Aunt Gevene, Nevander's presence brought a sense of comfort she hadn't realized she craved. Here in this library, surrounded by silent tomes of stories yet untold, she could finally relax.

The steady rhythm of his breathing mingled with the crackling fire, lulled Kallessa into a trance-like state. Her mind calmed, her own breaths slowing to match his. The edges of her vision grew hazy, suffused with warmth and an unfamiliar sense of security. Her eyelids grew heavy, fluttering closed—for just a moment.

Twenty-Three

NEVANDER HAD WATCHED KALLESSA long enough. Her eyes had fluttered closed, her face pale and tired from the emotional turmoil. He could barely tear his gaze away from her. Feelings he could no longer deny washed over him in a wave. He wanted to protect her, to hold her, to shield her from any more harm.

Before he could act on his impulse, before he could wake her and beg for her hand in marriage for real, Nevander tore himself away from the library. His boots echoed hollowly down the corridor as he made his way to Castien's chambers.

He found the prince lounging in an overstuffed chair, a blanket draped over his lap, newspaper obscuring his face. Before Nevander could speak, Castien's voice drifted from behind the pages.

"I saw your fiancée in the library earlier, ripping my mother's favorite poetry book to shreds." There was a rustle as he turned a page. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Was that what Kallessa had done before he arrived? It was hard to imagine her gentle hands tearing apart one of Queen Lyra's favorite poetry books. But he had ripped apart her painful past, the loss of her family and the life she once knew. How else did he expect her to react?

He strode to the fireplace and stared into the flames as they danced. "It wouldn't have been by the poet, Tynan Respa, would it?"

"Indeed, that would be the one." Castien's cavalier tone grated on Nevander's already frayed nerves.

Anger flared hot in his chest. Castien hadn't been there when Tynan confessed to murdering Kallessa's family. He wasn't the one who had to break her heart with the truth. In two quick strides, Nevander crossed the room and ripped the newspaper from Castien's hands.

"Did you know all along?" he demanded, voice low and dangerous. "Who she was?"

Castien met his gaze, unflinching. "Of course I did. I told you I knew everyone visiting my estate."

The implications hit Nevander like a physical blow. "Are you trying to manipulate me?"

For once, Castien remained silent, his gaze drifting to the wall. When he finally looked back at Nevander, his eyes were unreadable. "Are you in love with her?"

The question twisted something deep in Nevander's gut. He clenched his jaw, fighting the urge to lash out. "No," he ground out. "And even if I were, I have too many duties to the country to act on it."

Castien rubbed his forehead and pushed his hair back. "Despite what the girl might say, she is titled. You could marry her."

Nevander hurled the crumpled newspaper to the floor. "This is ridiculous. You need to butt out of my personal life. I can take care of myself. I don't need you meddling in it."

Castien raised a brow. "Are you sure?"

Nevander inhaled slowly, trying to rein in his temper. He exhaled, counted to three, and tried again. But the words burst forth, anyway. "Is that what you're doing with your time nowadays, instead of preparing to rule? Playing matchmaker?"

Something dangerous flashed in Castien's eyes. He rose from his chair, body rigid with barely contained fury.

"Get. Out." He bit off each word.

Nevander squared his shoulders, legs spread. "No."

They glared at each other, neither willing to back down. The tension crackled between them like lightning before a storm.

Finally, Castien spoke, his voice low and bitter. "You have no idea what I suffer, Prince Nevander, third in place to the throne."

The venom in his words hit home. Nevander's shoulders sagged. "Well, why don't you tell me, instead of just leaving us all in the dark? I do care

about you, I want to see you well, yet here you are, just withering away right before our eyes!"

Castien's face paled. "You think I'm manipulating you? Have you ever thought that I want to see you and the others I love, happy?" He turned away, staring out the window at the fading light. "Ciana told me what kind of man you were for the past year. That you drank yourself into a stupor with Tarrick and rutted every wench you could grab. That you walked around as a shell of your former self, hollow-eyed and vacant."

He gripped the sash, as if he would throw it open, but he didn't. "You fought the war I should have fought. You carry all that violence in your heart. Yet this past week, I saw a glimmer in your eye when you looked at Kallessa. I saw you laugh, I saw you start to live again."

Castien released the sash and faced Nevander again. His voice dropped. "Now tell me again how you feel."

A lump formed in Nevander's throat as the weight of Castien's words sank in. "I'm sorry."

"You should be." Castien snatched the paper from the floor and settled back into his chair. "Go on, get out. I have to catch up on my gossip." He buried his face in the newspaper, dismissing Nevander.

Nevander lingered for a moment, the silence stretching between them. Then he turned and left the room.

In the hallway, he leaned against the cool stone wall, his jaw clenched. Castien was right. Nevander had been so absorbed in his own pain, he'd failed to see his friend's suffering. Kallessa had rekindled something in him, a spark of life he'd long forgotten.

Unbidden images of her flooded his mind: the way her eyes glowed when she smiled, the melodic lilt of her laughter, the graceful curve of her neck. Every aspect of her captivated him.

He shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts away. A relationship with Kallessa would only lead to heartache for them both. He had responsibilities, duties that couldn't be ignored.

And yet...

The thought of never seeing her again, of letting her slip through his fingers, tore at him in ways he refused to define.

Nevander sat rigid in his chair, the lone lamp on his desk casting long shadows across the room. He'd sent a maid to tend to Kallessa in the library, but her presence lingered in his mind like a stubborn perfume.

His fingers cramped around the quill, poised to write the missive that would set Kallessa free, no matter her circumstances. The irony wasn't lost on him. For two years, he'd shirked every governmental duty, leaving the realm's affairs to his father and eldest brother. But this... this he couldn't ignore.

In reality, his own freedom was a short-lived reprieve, a time to heal from his injuries at war. But the war was over. At least that's what he told himself every night before sleep held him captive.

He dipped the pen, the scratch of nib against parchment unnaturally loud in the quiet room. By the time he returned to Vaston, he vowed, he'd unravel the mystery of Kallessa's fall from grace.

Twenty-Four

THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED blurred into a whirlwind of for Kallessa.

Nevander's hands, calloused yet gentle, guided her as she nocked an arrow. The string thrummed, vibrating through her fingers as she released. Bull's eye. Her triumphant grin mirrored his, a shared secret in a sea of onlookers at the women's archery tournament.

She watched him fence, mesmerized. Nevander moved like quicksilver, his blade an extension of himself. Sweat glistened on his brow, and Kallessa's breath caught as he disarmed his burly, red-bearded opponent with a flourish.

They'd sat through elaborate dinner parties, her corset digging into her ribs, a constant reminder of the façade she maintained. She navigated the labyrinth of court etiquette, stealing glances at Nevander across candlelit tables.

There was scarcely a moment to catch her breath.

Yet through it all, Kallessa found herself drawn inexorably to Nevander's side.

Amidst the chaos, they found stolen moments. Hidden alcoves in sprawling gardens became their sanctuary. Horseback rides through rolling hills offered freedom from prying eyes.

And each morning, she waged an internal war. *This isn't real*, her mind cautioned. *It will end soon*. But her heart blissfully ignored her mind's

warnings, running recklessly toward Nevander's warmth without a single regret.

Two weeks vanished like morning mist, leaving only two days until the festival's end. Dread coiled in Kallessa's stomach as she returned to her rooms after a ride with Nevander.

A letter awaited her on the nightstand, its crisp parchment bearing the royal seal.

Lady Kallessa,

You are required at the masquerade ball this evening in the grand ballroom. Your costume has been provided for you.

Sincerely,

Prince Castien Ravenbluff

P.S. Don't make me forget to tell princess Ciana about your asinine riding skirt.

Kallessa chuckled. Prince Castien was an enigma. She laid the letter aside and opened the box. Pulling back the tissue, she gasped. An impossible gown of peacock teal and burnished gold winked back at her in the last light of dusk. She pulled it from the confines of the box.

The dress shimmered, reflecting a dazzling array of royal blues, emerald greens, and burnished golds that danced like sunlight on rippling water. It was a masterpiece, flawlessly tailored and adorned with lavish beadwork.

Two small boxes held jewel-encrusted slippers and an exquisite mask made from delicate peacock feathers.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. A maid stood outside.

"I'm here to fix your hair and dress you, my lady."

She hadn't had anyone's help before. But, looking down at her disheveled appearance, she could guess who'd sent this maid. As she let the girl into the room, she asked, "Did the prince send you?"

She curtsied. "Yes, my lady."

Of course he had.

"Please sit here, my lady."

As Kallessa sat at the dressing table she said, "Please just call me Kallessa."

The maid took her brush in hand and started working through Kallessa's tangles.

"Yes, my lady."

Twenty-Five

BASTARD. THE WORD ECHOED in Nevander's mind as he tugged at his cravat, the silk cool against his fingertips. For almost two weeks, he'd greedily devoured every moment with Kallessa, savoring her smiles, basking in the delight that danced in her eyes. Yet with every shared laugh, every stolen glance, the weight of his deception grew heavier.

Tonight, it would end. Thanks to Castien's overzealous valet, the truth was inevitable. But for a few precious hours more, he'd cling to this dream, this fantasy of a life he could never truly have.

The ballroom swirled with color and sound, a dizzying cacophony of laughter and clinking crystal. Nevander stood at its edge, feeling both overdressed and exposed. The fine garments, once as familiar as his own skin, now felt foreign, a costume donned by a man he no longer recognized.

He caught his reflection in an ornate mirror, and a stranger stared back. Gone was the rugged soldier, replaced by a vision in deep green and gold. The mask of shimmering dragon scales accentuated his eyes, lending him an otherworldly air. His freshly shaven face, courtesy of Castien's valet, who'd hacked away at his beard before Nevander could protest, felt naked, vulnerable.

Around him, the ball pulsed with life. Masked figures twirled and spun, a living kaleidoscope gliding across polished granite. The melody, celebrating the harvest's end, wove through the air, both joyous and melancholic.

And then, through the sea of faces, he saw her.

Kallessa.

Even masked, she was unmistakable. The teal silk of her gown shimmered like sunlight on water, gold embroidery catching the light of a thousand candles. Nevander's breath caught, his mouth going dry as his eyes traced every exquisite detail. She turned, speaking to someone, and the elegant twist of her mahogany curls exposed the graceful curve of her neck and back. His fingers itched to trace that line, to feel the warmth of her skin.

A steely resolve crystallized within him, something he hadn't felt in years. His legs carried him forward before his mind could catch up, long strides eating up the distance between them. The crowd seemed to part, as if sensing the intensity of his purpose.

For this one night, this fleeting, magical moment, Kallessa would be his. He'd hold her close, memorize the rhythm of her heartbeat, the scent of her hair. And when the music faded, and the masks came off, he'd face whatever came next.

A thousand candles illuminated the grand ballroom, their light refracting through crystal chandeliers and casting a magical glow. Kallessa's breath caught in her throat. Never had she seen anything so enchanting. Shimmering fabric shaped like dragons draped across the walls, while glittering three-quarter moon banners strung across the ceiling added a touch of whimsy. One entire wall boasted a table laden with an array of delicacies that made her mouth water. The room pulsed with life as masked dancers swung and spun to a staccato beat that set her own feet tapping.

For tonight, she could be anyone she wanted, the mask giving her glorious anonymity. The thought sent a shiver of excitement down her spine, reminding her of the scandalously open back of her gown. Only as someone else, someone who wasn't little quiet Kallessa Dahoko, would she dare to wear such a dress. Once, Kallessa Wynlar would have worn it proudly.

Through the sea of masks and finery, she spotted Lady Tursam, distinguished by her walking stick. Dressed in shimmering white from head to toe, the older woman stood out against the candlelight like a ghost from another era.

“Good evening, Lady Tursam,” Kallessa said when she’d gotten close enough to be heard over the music.

The woman’s eyes narrowed momentarily before recognition dawned.

“Lady Kallessa, you look quite—colorful.”

There was a pause, as if Lady Tursam had meant to say something else. Kallessa was sure of it, but she didn’t push. Instead, she asked, “Have you enjoyed your week?”

The matron’s lips pursed. “Of course I have. What’s with the questions?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Kallessa felt her cheeks warm.

“How is your fiancé? What was his name?” Lady Tursam’s face twisted as if Kallessa were missing a joke.

“Nevander. He’s well, I believe.”

“Well, where is he?”

Kallessa had been wondering the same thing, her nervousness growing with each passing moment in this unfamiliar crowd. “I’m not sure, my lady.”

Lady Tursam glanced about the room, her white mask glinting in the candlelight. “Go on, dance, while you’re young. This is no time to stand around chatting with old ladies. There will be time for that when you start to grow chin hairs.”

Kallessa bit back a startled laugh. Was Lady Tursam joking? She couldn’t tell. She curtsied and smiled demurely, but the older woman had already turned away, disappearing into the crowd.

A familiar sensation whispered down her back, a feeling she’d begun to recognize. She turned, her heart leaping into her throat.

There, before her, stood the most stunning man she’d ever seen. Spring-green eyes shone from behind a shimmering mask of dragon scales that accentuated their unusual color. His tousled golden hair looked glossy and inviting; her fingers tingled with the desire to touch it. His jawline was smooth and strong, his lips curved in a devastating smile that stole her breath. The dark suit fit his muscular body to perfection, and she felt heat rushing to her cheeks.

He stepped closer to her, his scent of clove and cedar filling her senses, and took her hand in his.

“May I have this dance, my lady?”

The world around them faded, the colors and sounds of the ballroom rushing back only when she remembered to breathe. “Of course.” Her voice

was breathy and low.

He led her to the floor, where the dancers had slowed to a swaying sea of color. The music softened into a song she hadn't heard in years.

"It's the Ballad of Ederon Sea," Nevander whispered into her ear, his warm breath sending tingles across her skin.

His hand slid down her bare back, curving against her spine. "May I say, beloved Kallessa, that you look ravishing this evening?"

She swallowed. "Thank you. As do you. You…you shaved your beard."

He scoffed. "It wasn't exactly my idea. It seems the prince's valet had other thoughts."

"The prince had his valet sent to your rooms?"

Nevander nodded, a wry smile on his lips.

"He had a maid sent to mine."

Nevander laughed and shook his head. "I suppose we were both due for a makeover."

Emboldened by the anonymity of the mask, Kallessa dared to stroke her hand along his jawline. "I like it."

He leaned his face into her palm, his eyes darkening. "Mmm, that feels good. Please stop, or I shall have to devour you, my little peacock."

A thrill ran through her at his words, and she giggled, surprising herself.

"Did you know," Nevander began, "that peacocks are the favorite meal of the Axan dragon?"

A grin broke on her lips. "I had no idea."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Guess who I am this evening."

The dragon. His outfit made sense to her now. The scales, the colors.

He pulled her closer, his eyes falling to her lips. "And you are my tasty reward, Kallessa Wynlar."

Was he going to kiss her? But then he swung her around the room, twirling her about, her skirts flying, her mind whirling as fast and free as her body.

As they danced, he whispered the lyrics in her ear, his voice a warm caress against her skin.

There were two lovers
Gone to sea
The Ederon sea
Shall separate thee
There were two lovers

Who sank to the bottom
Of the bottomless
Ederon sea

The lyrics took on a different meaning than any other time she'd ever heard the song. Nevander's deep voice and lilting whisper made her long to be with him in the crashing waves, holding on to each other, defying the sea that threatened to separate them.

My one true love
The Ederon sea
Shall never equal
My love for thee
Dear lover beware
Of the Ederon sea
Dance lightly, dear lover
Hold tightly to me

She was entranced, lost in the melody of his voice and the warmth of his embrace. They spun about the room until she felt engulfed in a sea of elation, Nevander holding her as if she were the most precious jewel in the world.

Time seemed to lose all meaning. They danced song after song, existing in a private world where the crowd's singing and laughter seemed distant and unimportant. When they paused for refreshments, Nevander's hand never left the small of her back, a constant reminder of his presence.

As the last song drew to a close, he led her through a door that opened to the cool night. The music behind them became a soft murmur. And then, they were alone.

If Nevander could choose one night to never end, it was this one. As he'd spun Kallessa around the room, engulfed in her scent and presence, he realized this was the first time he'd truly felt alive in almost a year. When he'd first seen her tonight, his heart had nearly stopped.

Her dark waves were curled and twisted atop her head, each tendril begging to be unraveled by his fingers. The peacock teal gown hugged her

curves, shimmering in the moonlight like scales on a mermaid's tail. Nevander's throat tightened. He'd give anything to run his hands along the silky fabric, to feel her warmth beneath.

And then the music had shifted, and that song about the lovers at sea filled the air. A deep longing stirred within him, unsettling in its intensity. He pulled Kallessa closer, desperate to share these feelings with her, even if he couldn't voice them.

She shivered in his arms, bringing him back to the present. The night had turned colder, a biting chill in the air. A breeze from the north carried the promise of winter's arrival.

"Are you cold?" he asked, already shrugging off his jacket. His own skin was on fire.

"A little," Kallessa admitted.

He draped his jacket around her shoulders, enveloping her in his warmth and scent. The sight of her wearing his clothing stirred something primal inside him, a possessiveness that caught him off guard. He had no right to claim her, but in that moment, with the moonlight caressing her face and the wind teasing her dark curls, he didn't care. He wanted her to be his, consequences be damned.

She stared into the night, the three-quarter moon rising above a glowing cloud bank on the horizon, each passing second bringing them closer to the end of this charade.

"I miss the sea," she said softly. "My father used to take us sailing, and my mother and I spent days at the shore, collecting unusual shells."

Nevander's chest tightened. His own memories of the sea still warred within him, a place that had brought him such joy, and equally such pain. "I think I miss the smell the most," he murmured.

She turned to him, golden eyes shining. "Yes. That briny, salty scent. It's just not the same surrounded by all these trees and land."

Nevander smiled. "Two lovers who love the sea."

They stood in companionable silence for a moment before he spoke again. "It's been almost a year since I was at sea. I just realized how much I missed it."

"Why has it been so long?"

Because death followed him from the war, and now the sea was a graveyard. The words lodged in his throat, threatening to choke him.

“I’ll tell you one day when we are old and gray, fiancée,” he said, the endearment tasting like ash on his tongue. They would never watch each other get old and gray. They only had mere days left. Or maybe hours.

She smiled sadly. “Yes, when we’re old and gray.”

That soft expression on her face was going to break him. Nevander swallowed hard, desperate to delay the moment when reality would intrude. “What are you thinking?”

Kallessa’s gaze drifted back to the ballroom, where masked figures twirled and laughed. “I wish this night would never end. It’s one night where we can be anyone we wish, where society isn’t here to judge us, or put us back in our place. Freedom.”

Freedom. He’d never known real freedom. He was born into responsibilities that he would eventually have to attend to, leaving this fairytale behind, but for tonight…

“What would you like to do, my masked princess?” he asked.

A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes. “Oh no, not a princess. If we get to be whoever we want for the night, I want to be the scullery maid.”

Nevander threw his head back in shocked laughter. “The what?”

She grinned. “Do you know what the scullery maid is doing right now?”

He continued to laugh, shaking his head. “Of course not.”

“Do you want to know?” she teased, leaning in closer.

Nevander studied her mirthful expression, drinking in every detail. “Not really.”

“Well, neither does anyone else,” Kallessa concluded. “So, my masked prince, who do you want to be?”

Her calling him a prince sent a shudder down his spine. What would Kallessa think if she knew? Suddenly he wanted to rip off his mask. Suddenly he wanted to proclaim that yes, he was the bloody prince of Dracia. What of it? Did that make him any less human than a scullery maid? But a prince who wore his heart on his sleeve was sure to be destroyed. When this mask came off, he wouldn’t even be able to hide behind his beard anymore, thanks to an overzealous valet. And that time was coming soon.

All his fears. All his shame. Exposed. But not yet. Tonight, they’d dream.

“I always thought I’d be a good stable boy,” he said, forcing a grin. He slid her hand around his arm. “Shall we go for a walk?”

Twenty-Six

AS KALLESSA STEPPED ONTO the brick path winding around the western part of the estate, she couldn't help but steal another glance at Nevander. In the distant torchlight, his smooth, angular jawline and mysterious mask transformed him into something magical.

The wind whispered through the oak trees, their papery leaves rustling secrets as they ventured into the darker reaches of the grounds. A shiver ran through her, and she hugged herself against the chill.

"It feels colder than before," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Nevander's eyes flicked to the night sky. "Yes, the weather is changing. Soon it will be winter here."

The thought of snow and ice made Kallessa's teeth chatter. "We don't have much of a winter in Teansong. The warm breezes from the south sea keep it temperate year-round."

"Vaston isn't quite so lucky," Nevander replied with a wry smile. "We can get brutal ice storms that lock down travel and commerce for days."

Kallessa wrinkled her nose. "Ice storms. No, thank you. I have too much of my mother's Reykian blood to appreciate that. The cold goes right through me."

A gust of wind whipped a loose curl across her face. She pushed it back and snuggled deeper into Nevander's coat. It smelled of smoldering wood smoke and warm male. If she could somehow bottle and sell that intoxicating scent, she and Aunt Gevene would be set for life.

As they rounded a corner, the towering hedges of the estate's maze appeared, the carefully sculpted shrubbery casting eerie shadows in the moonlight.

"Is that the maze?" Kallessa whispered. It looked much more intimidating in the dark than when she'd spotted it from the upstairs window of the estate.

Nevander raised his eyebrow, a mischievous grin quirking his lips. "Up for a little adventure, my dear scullery maid?"

Kallessa bit her cheek to stifle a grin. "We don't have a lantern. How will we find our way in the dark?"

He winked, his ornate mask glittering in the pale light. "Where's the fun in that?"

A thrill raced through her. She'd never done anything like this before. Wandering through a maze with a masked dream of a man and only the moon for company? A chance to escape her mundane life for just one night? Yes. She was up for a little adventure.

The three-quarter moon, veiled by racing clouds, cast everything in strange highlights and shadows. Glistening limestone gravel crunched under their shoes as they entered the maze. The fragrant boxwood shrubs towered above them, pruned to vertical perfection, creating walls of greenery that seemed to close in around them.

She took Nevander's hand. His palm radiated warmth, feeling like a furnace against her chilled skin.

"Your hands are like ice," Nevander murmured, stopping to gently rub her other hand between his. His deep voice softened, losing its teasing edge. "We can go back."

Kallessa shook her head. She wasn't losing this chance. "No, I don't want to go back. This is our night, remember?" She squeezed his fingers.

A faint smile played across Nevander's lips. "There's a surprise waiting at the center of the maze if you can brave the chill a bit longer."

"I'm fine, really," she insisted.

"You are indeed." His eyes danced with a mixture of amusement and something deeper, more intense. He pulled his heavy jacket closer around her slender frame before reclaiming her hand.

They wound their way around path after path, the hedges seeming to shift and morph around them as they delved deeper into the labyrinth. It felt like

they were going in circles, the twists and turns leaving Kallessa utterly disoriented.

"Do you know where we are?" she asked, glancing at the imposing shrubbery hemming them in on all sides. She had to look straight up to see the sky.

"Yes, of course," Nevander responded.

She pulled him to a stop, the towering hedges surrounding them like sentinels. "How do you know?"

He gestured into the night sky with an elegant sweep of his arm. "The moon."

That was a rather cryptic response.

"If we keep heading toward the moon, we will be walking in the same direction," he elaborated, a faint smile playing across his lips.

Kallessa raised her eyebrows. "I thought you just followed one wall to make your way through a maze."

"Usually you would, but this one is trickier. Queen Lyra had a master maze designer create this one."

"Who knew there was such an occupation," Kallessa huffed.

"They're all the rage in Krithadean society right now. Anyway, you can't just follow one wall in this maze."

"So you're just making sure we're headed in the same direction?"

"Well, that, and I've been through this maze before."

He seemed awfully familiar with a royal estate for a shipbuilder's son. "How many times have you been here?"

"Just a couple of times, on business with my father." There was a hint of hesitation in his voice that made Kallessa wonder what he wasn't telling her.

A mockingbird twittered in the bushes as a breeze carried the sharp scent of boxwood. What time was it? Her feet were aching in the formal slippers she wore. Yet again she had on improper footwear for a midnight trek.

Sensing her hesitation, Nevander squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Almost there."

She hoped so. Soon she'd either be barefooted, or he'd be carrying her. They continued, their steps muffled by the soft earth. The only sound was the whisper of leaves brushing against their clothes.

Suddenly, they turned a sharp corner, and Kallessa gasped, all thoughts of rubbing toes forgotten. There, nestled in the heart of the maze, stood a glass

house. It gleamed like a jewel in the moonlight, ethereal and enchanting.

The structure, shaped like an octagon, had smooth glass walls rising to a pointed roof that seemed to pierce the night sky. The glossy surface reflected the silver-lined clouds drifting lazily above and the dark, dense bushes that surrounded it.

It was straight out of a fairytale, a secret hideaway where lovers met. The perfect place where scullery maids and stable boys snuck off together, stealing forbidden kisses and dreaming of a future beyond their station.

Nevander's heart raced as he guided Kallessa into the octagon house. He'd known about this hidden gem for years, but had never found a reason to visit, until now. Queen Lyra's favorite refuge stood empty tonight, as if waiting for them.

Entering was like stepping into another realm. Residual heat from the day still soaked the velvet cushioned benches lining the walls in warmth. Small stacks of leather-bound books and delicate figurines sitting on free standing shelves glowed in the moonlight. Beneath, a basket overflowed with soft furs, promising warmth against the night's chill.

"This is enchanting," Kallessa breathed, her fingers trailing over each surface as if memorizing its texture. She lifted a porcelain fox, turning it in the dim light filtering through leaded glass windows. Her mask caught the glow, feathers casting intricate shadows across her cheekbones.

Nevander found himself utterly captivated. He couldn't tear his gaze from the graceful curve of her neck, the way her lips parted in wonder as she examined the space.

No, she was what made this place enchanting.

He crossed to the table, struck a match, and lit the oil lamp. Golden light spilled across Kallessa's shimmering teal gown, transforming her into a sea goddess risen from the depths. As she turned toward him, her eyes sparkled with delight.

The distance between them felt suddenly achingly vast. Nevander closed it in three long strides, sliding his arms around her shoulders and drawing her near. "You are lovely," he murmured.

A shiver rippled through her at his touch. He pulled her closer, reveling in the softness of her curves molding against him. Her warmth seeped through the layers of silk and linen, igniting a fire in his core.

In this secluded refuge, they were utterly alone. The rest of the world faded away, held at bay by glass walls and a labyrinth of hedges. Yet even as his soul cried out for this intimacy, a nagging voice reminded him that this was a mistake. He'd avoided being too close to her over the past two weeks, knowing his resistance was pathetically weak.

Tonight he could pretend he was a stable boy, but he wasn't. Every action had repercussions.

He reluctantly released her and guided her to the bench seat, his fingers lingering on the soft fabric of her gown. Retrieving the plush furs from the basket, he unfolded them with a gentle shake.

"Won't you sit with me?" Kallessa asked. Her eyes were like liquid gold in the lamplight, framed by that feathered mask. They seduced him with their molten depths, melting away his resolve as surely as spring sun on winter snow.

Nevander's resistance crumbled. He settled into the corner of the bench, drawing her to his side. Her body pressed against him, a perfect fit. He draped the furs over them, the luxurious weight enveloping them in a cocoon of comfort, blocking out the night's chill.

Kallessa yawned suddenly, her hand flying to cover her mouth. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, a blush staining her cheeks. "I can't believe I just did that. Must be all the dancing catching up with me."

Her embarrassment was endearing. "No need to apologize," he murmured. "We've had quite the evening."

She nestled closer, her head coming to rest on his shoulder. Then, softly at first, she began to sing. The melody of the Ederon Sea ballad filled the small space, wrapping around them like another layer of fur.

"There were two lovers,
Gone to sea,
The Ederon sea,
Shall separate thee."

Her low, melodic voice whispered to his soul, weaving itself into the fabric of his being. He couldn't imagine another place in all the world he'd rather be than right there, right then, with Kallessa in his arms.

She turned her face up to his, singing the last verse of the ballad. Her breath ghosted across his skin, sending shivers down his spine.

"Dear lover beware,
Of the Ederon sea,
Dance lightly, dear lover,
Hold tightly to me."

I'm falling in love with you.

The words nearly burst from Nevander's mouth, unbidden. Only years of courtly training kept them trapped behind his teeth.

No, he couldn't be. This was just his mind playing tricks on him. It was this damn night, this damn glass house and its furs and cushions. He had no right to take her here.

Frustration mounted, his desire to hold her overwhelming his thoughts. He pulled her tighter against him, turning her body to face his. Her skirts tangled around their legs, but he didn't care. If he didn't kiss her lips right then, he would go mad.

Kallessa's heart raced as Nevander pulled her onto his lap. Suddenly, his heat was everywhere. A heady mix of desire and apprehension flooded her veins, her body humming with anticipation.

"I'm not sure we should do this," she whispered, even as her skin tingled beneath his touch. His fingers traced lazy patterns along her arms, leaving trails of goosebumps in their wake.

A wicked grin curled Nevander's lips, his dragon-scale mask lending him an air of danger. Kallessa's breath caught as his summer-green eyes dropped from her gaze to her mouth.

"No one cares where the scullery maid is, do they?"

He'd used her own words against her. She bit her lower lip nervously, and his gaze darkened as it raked over her mouth.

But he pulled back slightly, refocusing on her eyes. "Kallessa," his voice was strained, "when we were trapped behind the fireplace, I took liberties I shouldn't have. I won't do that to you now." He closed his eyes briefly, as if

struggling for control. When they opened again, they blazed with an intensity that burned through her. “Unless you give me permission.”

She swallowed hard, the sound deafening in the quiet darkness of the secluded glass house. Her mouth felt dry, her palms damp. Something indefinable smoldered in Nevander’s gaze, something that made her feel cherished and desired all at once.

She knew what she wanted. If only for this one night, she wanted to spend it in his arms.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Expecting the passionate onslaught from their encounter behind the fireplace, Kallessa braced herself. Instead, Nevander gently turned her around, his touch reverent.

“What—” she began, but her words dissolved as he tugged the pins from her hair, releasing each curl, and running his fingers through her locks. When the last pin fell away, he massaged her scalp, eliciting a small moan of pleasure from her throat.

“I’ve wanted to do this ever since I saw all those intricate curls and braids,” he whispered in her ear, the heat of his words turning her insides to liquid. “I wanted to run my fingers through your glorious mane.”

It was unexpected, this tenderness, this caring gesture. Why he wanted to run his fingers through her hair, she didn’t quite understand. It had always been a nuisance to her. But he made her see herself through new eyes. Not as a small dark blight on the Wynlar family name, but a beautiful woman. A desirable woman.

She turned back to face him.

“Thank you,” she said, not sure why she was thanking him, but right then, she just wanted to express gratitude for this night, this desirable man she had all to herself.

He chuckled quietly, the rich timbre of his voice sending delightful tremors through her body. “You’re easy to please.”

“It’s just...” Kallessa faltered, a knot forming in her throat. How could she finish this thought?

He cupped her cheek tenderly with his calloused palm. “When was the last time anyone took care of you, Kallessa Wynlar?” he murmured.

Her breath escaped in a shuddering sigh. How long had it been since anyone held her? Cared for her? Saw her as more than a burden or a duty?

A tear trickled down her cheek, and she whispered the answer she hadn't even wanted to admit to herself. "Too long."

His other palm came up to frame her face, his thumbs brushing away the dampness on her cheeks. He bent toward her, his gaze locked onto hers with an intensity that stole her breath away. His lips brushed against hers with a featherlight touch, igniting a firestorm of sensations. He trailed kisses along her damp cheeks before deftly sliding off her mask.

"No barriers between us tonight," he murmured. Raising her hand, he guided it to the satin mask covering his face. With trembling fingers, she grasped the silky ties and pulled the mask loose, letting it flutter to the ground.

Kallessa gasped, her breath catching in her throat. Without the mask, Nevander was devastatingly handsome, even more so than she could have imagined. His features were chiseled and refined, almost angelic, with high cheekbones, full lips, and a strong jawline. He looked younger without the beard, an aristocratic face that was unlike any son of a mere shipbuilder she'd ever seen.

For a fleeting moment, he almost looked like... but she scoffed inwardly. No, of course not. It was simply her imagination running away with her.

Nevander gazed at her like she was the only person in existence. Then the rest of the world faded into oblivion as he crushed his lips against hers in a searing kiss that erased all coherent thought.

His kiss was desperate, fervent, as if their mouths were made solely for this union. The world tilted, Kallessa's vision blurring as she surrendered to the relentless tide of his embrace. His hands traveled from her face to the curve of her waist, pulling her closer until no space remained between them.

Kallessa's fingers tangled in his hair, reveling in its silky texture. The earthy scent of him filled her senses as he sent her spiraling into a realm of pure sensation.

Kallessa had never felt so exposed with all her clothes still on. Nevander had unlocked something within her, a world she'd only glimpsed in stolen

glances between her parents. Now, she understood that silent language of lovers, the depth of connection that transcended words.

His kisses left her dizzy, aching for more. More of what? The thought both thrilled and terrified her. A deep, primal longing had taken root, unfurling like a night-blooming flower reaching for the moon.

When Nevander pulled back, she nearly whimpered at the loss. But then his fingers were there, brushing mahogany curls from her forehead with a tenderness that made her heart constrict, his fingers trailing down the curve of her back.

“I wish...” he began, his voice a husky whisper.

He never finished, but he didn’t have to. She felt the same yearning, the same desperate desire for something more. She wished for…

Everything.

He tucked the soft furs snugly around them both, pulling her against the solid warmth of his chest. His skin’s heat and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat were like the sweetest narcotic, lulling her into a hazy euphoria. She wanted more - his touch, his scent, the feeling of utter safety and contentment in his embrace.

“Tell me your favorite childhood memory,” Nevander said suddenly, his fingers idly trailing down her arm.

How could she think of just one? Her childhood had been charmed, happy. Blessed. Whatever a person wanted to call it. But as she sifted through the kaleidoscope of happy moments, one crystallized with startling clarity.

“I was twelve,” she began, her voice soft with nostalgia. “Father led me out to the field where our horses were racing and playing. He smiled and asked, ‘are you old enough to take care of your own horse?’ I squealed with excitement and told him, yes, of course. He waved his arm across the valley and said, ‘Pick one.’”

She paused, lost in the memory. “I chose Iona, a spirited filly with a spotted tan and black coat. From that day on, she was mine to care for, to love.”

Kallessa’s voice took on a dreamy quality as she recalled those carefree days. “We chased sunrises together, galloping across open fields and rolling hills. The wind in my hair, Iona’s power beneath me... I felt invincible, like I could outrun the entire world.”

A lump formed in her throat as the stark contrast between then and now hit her. Now, she owned nothing, was no one.

“Do you still have Iona?” Nevander asked, his deep voice pulling her back to the present.

Kallessa’s chest tightened. She didn’t want to talk about horses anymore, didn’t want to dwell on all she’d lost. This night was magical, separate from the weight of her past. She wanted to preserve that feeling for as long as possible. Forcing a smile, she shook her head slowly.

“Enough about me. It’s your turn.”

A thousand memories of childhood flickered through Nevander’s mind as he held Kallessa close.

“I don’t know if I’d call this a favorite memory,” he began, his voice low and intimate in the quiet of the octagon house, “but the way your father let you pick out a horse reminds me of the day my father decided I was old enough to go to the shipyard alone.”

Kallessa snuggled closer to him and he drew the furs up around them. “I was obsessed with the shipyard when I was little. All the action, the yelling, the ships… it all fascinated me.”

“Go on,” Kallessa murmured, her voice soft and sleepy. He pulled her tighter as the memory took hold.

“When I was seven, my father had a model ship made for me that I could put together, just like the men at the shipyard.” His voice took on a wistful tone. “I spent weeks fitting each piece together, my small fingers learning the intricacies of ship construction. When I finished, I displayed it proudly for years.”

He paused, remembering the pride in his father’s eyes when he’d presented the finished model. “Every year, I begged my mother to let me go to the shipyard with my father, but she always said I was too young.”

“One day, when I was probably twelve years old, I was fed up with being told I was too little, so I snuck out and went to the docks in disguise. When I returned, my older brother was waiting for me. He’d found out and was going to tell on me, the brat that he was. We got into a fight in my bedroom

and he took my model ship and slammed it to the floor, breaking all my hard work into shards of wood."

He huffed a laugh. "I was blind with rage. I hit him as hard as I could. When my mother discovered us bruised and bloody, she told my father."

Nevander's voice softened. "But when father asked us what happened, my older brother never told him I'd gone to the shipyard. Instead, he said I beat him up so badly he thought his arm was broken."

He shook his head. Tarrick always had a backward way of showing his love. He still did. It was a shame he spent all his time drowning in alcohol.

Nevander pushed the thought away, focusing on the warmth of Kallessa in his arms. "He was so convincing, Father told me if I could beat up my older brother, I could defend myself in the shipyard. From that day forward, I could come and go as I pleased."

He didn't add that he still had guards trailing him at a respectable distance, but that wasn't the purpose of the story.

"I never understood why my brother told Father I beat him up until years later. I finally realized he saw how much I wanted to go and devised a plan to convince Father I wasn't a baby anymore."

Nevander murmured, exasperation coloring his voice. "My brother, always the trickster."

Glancing down at Kallessa, his breath caught in his throat. Her eyes had closed, soft breaths escaping her parted lips. She looked ethereal in the dim light, her long lashes fanning across her cheeks and her curls spilling over his arm.

A fierce longing gripped him. Would it be so wrong if they just stayed there, cocooned in their own private world? Gently, he slid his arm around her, easing her snugly against his chest as he gazed out through the glass walls of the solarium, watching the trees sway in the breeze.

There, to the north, were the seven bright stars that made up Enkin's Ship, the constellation that had guided him home from the dark depths of the sea more times than he could count. Enkin, the sea captain who'd risked everything to carry the queen's heart with him on a perilous journey to return it to her. It was his most precious cargo, and he fought a raging tempest all night, battling crashing waves and howling winds to make it safely back to her.

Yet Enkin never made it.

Nevander’s throat tightened as he glanced down at Kallessa’s sleeping face again. How much of a tempest would he fight for her? What if tonight was all they had?

He traced a finger down her cheek. Then, tonight, he would dream with Kallessa in his arms, her soft curves molded against him, her floral scent enveloping his senses. He ran his palm across his now smooth jawline. And if tomorrow, the world burned and crumbled to ash, at least he would have this perfect memory to hold on to.

Twenty-Seven

AS KALLESSA WOKE FROM a surprisingly restful sleep, she noticed two things. First, she had a crick in her neck that was aching, but second, she was so warm and cozy, she didn't care. She stayed where she was with her eyes closed, feeling another new sensation.

The rise and fall of a hard chest.

Suddenly, the memories of the previous night crashed over her like a wave, and her eyes snapped open. She struggled against the confines of the blanket, only to find herself held fast by muscular arms that tightened instinctively around her.

Kallessa tilted her head, her gaze landing on Nevander's face. In slumber, the ever-present tension had melted away, leaving him looking younger, almost vulnerable. The usual pinch between his brows had smoothed out, and his cleanly shaven jaw now sported a dusting of stubble that made her fingers itch to touch it.

Was this what it was like to wake up next to someone you loved? Someone who cherished and protected you, who made you feel safe and adored? Clarity washed over her with a startling force. She wanted this intimacy, this closeness. She wanted him, Nevander, with an intensity that stole her breath away.

Her heart hammered as she hesitated. Then she slowly slid her hand from under the warm fur blanket to stroke his stubbled cheek. At her touch, his eyes fluttered open, thick lashes parting to reveal captivating green depths flecked with gold.

Unlike their first encounter, when nightmares haunted his waking moments, his eyes were soft, unfocused, like a lush forest shrouded in mist. As awareness seeped into those mesmerizing eyes, they settled on her face. A slow, lazy smile spread across his lips, igniting a warmth in her core that had nothing to do with the fur blanket covering them. Kallessa found herself drawn closer, aching to taste those sensual lips again, to lose herself in his embrace.

But before she could act on her desire, Nevander's gaze shifted, focusing on something beyond her. "Look," he whispered, his voice husky with sleep. He pointed past her shoulder. "It's snowing."

She hadn't even glanced outside yet, too entranced by his face, his intense green eyes that seemed to peer into her soul. She gasped, pushing herself up, wincing as the movement sent a fresh jolt of pain through her cramped neck. But the discomfort faded to insignificance as she beheld the scene outside their glass sanctuary.

A flurry of white flakes drifted lazily past the window, transforming the world into a glistening wonderland. The maze's hedges wore caps of pristine snow, and icicles hung like delicate jewelry from nearby tree branches. It was as if nature itself had conspired to create this magical moment just for them.

Nevander's muscles tensed as Kallessa sat up, his instinct screaming to pull her back into their fur-lined cocoon. In this secluded nook, they were safe from the world's prying eyes and judgments. A possessive urge surged through him. He didn't want to share her, not even with the snow. But the determination in her eyes melted his resolve, and he found himself helping her to her feet.

In the filtered light of a snowy dawn, she was soft around the edges, her hair mussed and her dress wrinkled. Her eyes glowed and the freckles across her nose and cheeks stood out against the morning paleness of her skin. His fingers itched to trace those constellations, to map out every inch of her.

Kallessa wrapped a fur around her shoulders, excitement glinting in her eyes. “Come on, we have to go outside.”

How could he resist that look? He took his cloak and another fur and slid his feet into his boots.

As they stepped out into the opening of the maze, the chilly air brushed against his bare face, reminding him he couldn’t hide who he was much longer.

He didn’t want to hide from her anymore.

Kallessa had her face to the gray sky, her little pink tongue stuck out, trying to catch a snowflake. Snow dusted her hair and shoulders. She stopped to look closer, her eyes widening with delight.

“They’re like tiny stars, each one different. It’s amazing.” She pulled him closer, pointing at the flakes sticking to the furs.

He looked down obediently, not expecting to see stars, but she was right. The flakes were delicate and beautifully symmetrical. Each one a tiny, intricate lattice of frozen water, catching the light and refracting it in mesmerizing patterns.

How many times had he seen snow, yet never stopped to observe the loveliness of it?

“You are marvelously odd, my sweet Kallessa,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

She glanced up, prepared to be insulted, but he pulled her close. “There are stars on your eyelashes.” He brushed his lips against her eyelids.

“Let’s walk,” Kallessa said, her breath warm against his neck. “I want to feel the snow against my skin.”

“You’re not cold?” he asked.

“Not yet. I’ve been huddled next to a furnace all night,” she teased, her hands against his chest.

As they wandered through the maze, they came upon a bench. Kallessa swiped the thin layer of snow away and sat, patting the seat next to her. Nevander hesitated, knowing they were nearing the end of the maze, and possibly their time together.

Quietly, they sat, shoulders brushing, watching the snowflakes swirl in intricate patterns. The only sound was the gentle whisper of the wind weaving through the hedges.

Kallessa sighed. “This is so peaceful. I never knew snow could be so lovely.”

Nevander's arm tightened around her, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. She was what made the snow lovely. Because every time before this, when he'd seen snow, it had reminded him of death - the countless lives lost on the frozen battlefields, the crimson streaks staining the pristine white drifts. The memories of pain and the agonies of war would come flooding back, a torrent of anguish threatening to drown him in its depths.

Nevander had gone still beside her, tension radiating from him. Kallessa glanced up, finding his gaze unfocused and swirling with a turmoil she'd never seen before.

"Nevander," she said softly, "what's wrong?"

He startled at her voice, his eyes snapping to hers before his expression smoothed over. Oh yes, she knew that trick. Seen it enough times, done it enough times to know he was hiding something.

"It's—It's nothing."

She laid her hand across his. "It's not nothing. Has something happened?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Something happened, yes. But nothing you need to worry about. Just an old wound coming to the surface."

He moved to stand, his body coiled like a spring ready to snap. "Shall we make our way back?"

Kallessa grabbed his hand, holding him in place. "No," she said, surprised by the firmness in her own voice. "I want you to tell me what's wrong."

She watched Nevander closely, noting the tightness in his jaw and the shadows in his eyes. Her mind sparked with a memory of her mother's gentle coaxing whenever she was too stubborn or afraid to share her troubles.

"How about," she suggested, her thumb tracing soothing circles on the back of his hand, "instead of telling me what's wrong, you tell me a story?" It had always worked for her mother. Maybe it could help Nevander, too.

To her surprise, the tension in his shoulders eased slightly. He remained silent for a few heartbeats, his gaze distant and pensive. Then, with a slow

exhale, he spoke, his rich voice low and measured as he wove a story from the threads of his thoughts.

"The snow," he waved his hand before them, "I grew up around it, but I'd never seen the amount that falls in the Narian mountains until I served there during the war." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close as if seeking warmth against a chill only he could feel. "It was colder than anything I'd ever known."

Kallessa shook her head, trying to imagine it. "I've never even seen snow before. I had no idea how it could blanket everything, turning the landscape into a foreign place."

"Foreign," Nevander echoed, his voice distant. "Yes, that's exactly what it was. Foreign… and deadly."

A shiver ran down Kallessa's spine that had nothing to do with the cold. "Deadly?" she prompted gently.

Nevander swallowed hard, his gaze focused on something far beyond the snow-covered landscape before them. "Remember being trapped behind the fireplace?"

The abrupt change of subject startled her. That small, dark room behind the fireplace. How could she forget? The memory of that searing kiss, their bodies pressed together in the cramped space, was enough to melt the surrounding snow.

"Yes?" she replied, searching his face for clues.

"I told you a story about falling down a well," he continued, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "But that isn't the real reason small, dark places send me into a panic."

"What is the real reason?" she asked gently.

He paused, teeth grinding together. "Every time I see snow now, it's covered in blood. So much blood." His grip had tightened on her, but he seemed unaware of it. "That day still haunts my dreams and sent me into a spiral of depression for over a year."

A shudder rippled through her. That morning at the inn, when she'd awoken him from a nightmare - this was that story.

He scoffed, a harsh sound that seemed to tear from his throat. "I'll skip over everything stupid I did afterwards. You don't want to hear that."

"Nevander," she shook her head, "I can't imagine how the war affected you. Don't be so hard on yourself."

His eyes narrowed, his jaw clenching. "You haven't heard the story yet."

She waited, watching his gaze unfocus as he was transported back to that nightmarish time and place. For her sake, he was reliving his trauma.

“I was the best sea captain in the Dracian navy,” he began, his voice taking on a hollow quality that made Kallessa’s skin prickle. “If it was a battle on water, I led it. And I won, battle after battle, during the Birazahian war. But eventually, the fighting crept inland, and we had to follow.”

“I knew how to fire cannons and hit a ship at a hundred yards, but now we were fighting an enemy with musket rifles and hand held bombs - things we didn’t even know existed.” He shook his head. “I led my squad into a pass in the Narian mountains near the Birazahian border, chasing a rebel band that kept attacking our camp at night.”

Nevander’s voice dropped to a whisper, and Kallessa had to strain to hear him over the soft whisper of falling snow. “Our intel said it would be an easy victory, that we would have them by nightfall. But there was no way out of the pass. I should have gone to look for myself. If only I’d realized it was a trap...”

His throat bobbed, and Kallessa felt his heart pounding against her. “We were ambushed. I took a bullet in the shoulder and tumbled into a foxhole. Then,” he shuddered, his entire body trembling, “it collapsed in on me, burying me under a mountain of dirt and snow.”

Kallessa’s breath caught in her throat. No wonder he was terrified of enclosed spaces. She tightened her arms around him, as if she could somehow protect him from the memory.

He snapped his head up, focusing into the distance. “I could still hear the muffled screams and the booms of rifle fire, the crunch of bones, but I was helpless. I couldn’t move, could hardly breathe. Every time I tried to gasp, more frigid dirt fell into my mouth.”

Tears stung Kallessa’s eyes, feeling cold as they crept down her cheeks. This is what Nevander relived every time it snowed?

His breath shook as he inhaled. “I don’t know how the rescue team found me. But they did.” His usually vibrant green eyes were now as bleak as a frozen stream. “But every other man I’d led into that pass was… dead.”

The snow fell in silence, shrouding the world. Nevander's head throbbed as steaming blood melted the snow, over and over. He dared a glance at Kallessa, expecting to see horror in her eyes. Or at least disgust. Or some kind of judgement. Judge him, dammit! He wanted to see condemnation. Wasn't that what he deserved?

Why did she have tears in her big doe eyes? Why was she still hugging her sweet warm arms around him?

His stomach churned. She wasn't going to give him what he deserved - condemnation, revulsion, anger. She was too soft, too impossibly kind to fully understand the gravity of his grievous error that day. The sheer scale of death and destruction he'd wrought. An acidic wave of self-loathing washed over him. Wasn't that why he'd confessed it all to her? In a twisted way, he'd hoped she would finally see him for the monster he felt like on his darkest days.

"Didn't you hear me?" His voice cracked. "I killed my own men." His loyal crew, brave souls who'd followed him without hesitation, now rotted in the ground, their families left without fathers, brothers, or sons.

Kallessa held his gaze, her words soft but firm. "You didn't kill them, Nevander. The enemy did."

Her kindness only twisted the knife deeper. He pulled away, unable to bear her touch. "They were my responsibility," he ground out, fists clenching at his sides. As their captain, they'd trusted him with their lives, and he'd failed them utterly.

"Did you do the best you could?" she asked, her question simple but piercing.

Nevander wrestled with those few small words. Hadn't he? He'd fought with everything he had, sacrificing his body to shield his men, but it hadn't been enough.

Kallessa wiped tears from her eyes. "You may not have realized, but by telling me Tynan's last words, you released me from a burden I've carried for five years." Her voice quavered. "I thought my family's death was my fault. That they died because I didn't love them enough, or something I said or did that day caused the accident."

She took a shaky breath. "But I didn't kill my parents. And you didn't kill those soldiers."

Her understanding stunned him, cracking the armor he'd built around his heart.

“Oh Kallessa, I’m so—” he began. But she stopped him, pressing one damp finger to his lips. It was salty with the tears she’d swiped from her eyes. Tears for him.

“Stop apologizing,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. She replaced her finger with her lips in a tender kiss. They were cold and soft and yielding against his own. He shivered, but not from the chill.

She pulled back, a small smile forming. “Thank you for sharing that with me. I don’t know why I deserved to hear it, but-”

Nevander silenced her with another kiss, savoring her softness and the faint taste of salt from her tears. This wasn’t the lust he’d indulged in to forget in the past, a fleeting physical release that only left him emptier. No, this kiss allowed him to live in the present. He drank in her warmth and her simple acceptance.

No matter what happened to them after this, if he never saw her again after this was all over, he would never forget this moment. She’d given him a new snowy day to remember, one that almost felt like hope.

Exiting the maze felt like leaving another world behind, a realm filled with snow, fur blankets, shared stories, and the fragile beginnings of healing old wounds. Nevander’s confessions still swirled in Kallessa’s mind, their weight pressing on her heart.

She’d never felt this close to another person outside her family. And she didn’t want to let go of that dimension where only the two of them existed, bound together by unspoken understanding.

Serene quiet blanketed Ravenbluff Estate. It seemed the birds and woodland creatures cherished the stillness as much as Kallessa did.

It was all so breathtakingly beautiful. The snow had dwindled to a few delicate flakes lazily drifting as the sky lightened to a soft blue-gray. She drank in the peaceful vista, trying to commit every detail to memory.

But as dawn brightened the sky, it also illuminated the realities of the day.

She glanced at Nevander, noting the distant, unfocused look in his eyes, as if he were also trapped in the weight of the present moment. A faint crease appeared between his brows as he gazed out at the winter landscape.

There was something so familiar about his profile. His powerful jaw, straight nose, and slightly parted full lips tugged at distant memories. Kallessa studied him intently, wishing the answer would materialize from the recesses of her mind.

Instead, an ache grew in her chest. This false relationship, this charade they were playing, was going to tear her apart in the end. She'd tasted sweet desire, felt the warmth of true friendship, and now the intoxicating mix of these emotions left her forever changed.

She needed to distance herself from him before she lost herself completely. The thought twisted like a knife in her heart. Somehow, she had to endure the remaining days at the estate, present her ideas to Princess Ciana, and leave Ravenbluff behind forever.

The future stretched before her, a vast expanse devoid of color and vibrancy, bleak and gray with an overwhelming sense of loneliness clawing at her soul.

No, she was a surviver. She would get past this.

She had to think about her responsibilities. About Aunt Gevene, about her future. Wasn't Princess Ciana supposed to arrive today? She had to focus on securing her future. No one else would. If she had to face it alone, she would store up the memories of this night to keep her warm in the dark days ahead.

Nevander dreaded the night coming to an end. He reached up to stroke his beard, only to recall it was gone. Now, people would recognize him. He had to come clean with Kallessa before someone else told her who he was. This trip was meant to help Castien uncover traitors among them, not play fake fiancé to a destitute girl.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. No, she wasn't destitute in his eyes. She could have been the scullery maid that she joked about and he wouldn't care, his heart was already blind to it. But would she ever forgive him for deceiving her?

After the night they'd shared, she deserved the truth. She was everything good in this world, and he couldn't stand to deceive her a minute longer.

It didn't matter if she hated him afterwards; it didn't matter that it would destroy the fragile trust that had built between them.

He slowed, then stopped, gently grasping Kallessa's elbow. Her rich dark eyes, framed with those ridiculously long lashes, her cheeks blushed by the chilly air, her wild curls framing her face. That's how he wanted to remember her.

"Kallessa," he began, his voice catching. How could he put into words the emotions swirling within him?

"Yes?" Her eyes held an uncertain glint, as if she sensed the weight behind his forthcoming words.

"I have to tell you something." He paused, drinking in the sight of her. Oh, how he didn't want this to end, didn't want to shatter their tranquil bubble.

She looked up at him, her vulnerability called to his soul. He just wanted to crush her to him, to forget who he was and all the duties that constrained him. For this one moment, he yearned to be simply a man in love.

"I'm-" The words stuck in his throat.

But his sentence was abruptly interrupted by a page running full tilt toward them, face flushed from exertion.

"My lord, the prince requests your presence at once!" The page panted, bending over with his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

No…not now. Nevander's teeth ground, turning to the page. "What's happened?" But the urgency in the page's face had a thousand terrifying scenarios flashing through his mind.

"I don't know, my lord, just please come quickly," the page pleaded.

Nevander turned to Kallessa, but she'd already withdrawn her hand, her once expressive eyes now guarded. Anger rolled through him as he felt the connection they'd shared slipping through his fingers like grains of sand.

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "It's alright, I have things to attend to today. Take care of what you need to do." Without a backward glance, she turned and walked purposefully toward the estate.

Nevander's heart clenched painfully. He wanted to knock the page to the ground and run after her, to beg her not to leave his side. But duty, like an invisible chain, held him in place.

He turned back to the page, his voice low and dangerous. "Lead the way, and make haste."

Twenty-Eight

A TORRENT OF QUESTIONS swirled through Kallessa's mind as she entered her suite, shoving the ornate door shut with a resounding thud. What had Nevander been about to tell her before the page interrupted them? His gaze had been so intense, words on the tip of his tongue.

She inhaled deeply, Nevander's coat still warm and carrying his scent of clove and cedar. Shivers raced across her exposed skin as she unbuttoned it, her fingertips grazing her neck where he'd kiss it. Her skin still felt electrified from the memory of his touch. She caught her reflection in the mirror, cheeks pink, eyes alight with a fire she hadn't seen in years.

Kallessa's breath hitched as memories flooded back. Nevander's hands running through her hair, sliding across her exposed back, his lips soft yet insistent against hers. Suddenly, she no longer felt the chill.

She hung the dress back in the wardrobe, smoothing the fabric as if she could press her swirling thoughts flat. But her mind refused to quiet, replaying every moment, every touch, every whispered word.

An envelope on her nightstand caught her eye. She quickly slipped into a dressing gown and settling on the edge of her bed, grasped the mysterious envelope and broke the wax seal.

As she flipped open the paper, she was surprised to see a clean, simple script instead of the swirling flourishes from before.

Kallessa,

Castien has told me of your split skirts, and I am intrigued. Please join me in the east parlor at 9 am.

Yours,

Ciana Lionskye

Kallessa's breath caught in her throat. Princess Ciana had written her a personal note, forgoing all formalities and titles? Her fingers trembled as she held the letter, her mind whirling with questions. She'd never even laid eyes on royalty from her own kingdom, let alone exchanged correspondence.

A knot of nerves twisted in her belly. Who was she to be addressed so informally by a princess? The girl from Teansong, living with her aunt, stripped of her title.

No, she couldn't allow those insecurities to take root. This was her chance, maybe her last, to secure a future for herself.

As Nevander followed the page down the estate's winding halls, whispers and glances followed in his wake. Without the wild beard and long hair, they recognized him. A lead weight settled in his gut, pressing against his lungs. It was over, his freedom of anonymity ending, the burden of the crown once again upon his head. He forced the mask of his royal status back onto his face, a face filled with an emptiness that ate at his soul.

And he'd left Kallessa with that confession untold, on the tip of his tongue. How hard would it have been to just blurt it out? *I'm the bloody prince of Dracia.*

He wasn't sure whether to thank or throttle the harried looking page. Whatever had him rushing toward Castien's suite better be good. If he'd been pulled away on a whim, Castien would get an earful. Would he be able to get back to Kallessa and tell her the truth before she heard it secondhand? He lengthened his stride. He needed to end this quickly and get back to her, but to what end? Once Kallessa knew the truth, the fragile illusion they shared would shatter.

Well, what had he expected?

He hadn't expected to fall in love with her.

He overtook the page, resting a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I can take it from here. The prince is in his suite?"

The page stared wide eyed at him. "You- you're," then he swiftly bowed. Low. "Prince Nevander, I'm so sorry for not recognizing you."

"Get up," Nevander whispered quickly, glancing around. All he needed was more attention. Confusion written across the boy's face, he slowly rose, then inclined his head. "Yes, my lord, the prince is in his suite."

"You are dismissed."

The page scurried back down the long corridor. Thankfully, they were close to the private suites and the observers of their interaction were few. Heaving a sigh, Nevander strode to Castien's suite, not bothering to knock, and swung the door wide.

What he saw froze him in place, his rebuke stalled on his lips.

Castien, his face raw with longing and sadness, love and joy, sat watching the top of his niece's head as she read from a book in her lap. They sat side by side in one of Castien's many plush club chairs, a picture of domestic tranquility that seemed at odds with the tension thrumming through Nevander's body.

Akeela lay in Castien's lap and he absently stroked her back. The cool morning light glimmered off Wynna's coppery hair, brighter than Ciana's, but with eyes as grey as the dawn, just like Dane, her father.

At his abrupt entrance, both Wynna and Castien flicked their matching grey eyes upward. The guarded look on Castien's face fell into place, a stark contrast to the huge grin splitting Wynna's.

She wiggled out of the chair, her stocking feet hitting the carpet with a soft thud, and ran to Nevander, her arms wide. "Uncle Van!"

Nevander swung her around in a circle before putting her down. Her hair smelled like sunshine and summer, her cheeks warm.

"My, my, could you have possibly grown in the two weeks I've been gone?"

She giggled and patted Nevander's arm. "I'm only nine, uncle."

Nevander's lips quirked up. Then he glanced at Castien.

"Where is Ciana?"

Castien waved his hand. "Oh, she's about. Did I forget to mention that she was coming?"

Yes, as a matter of fact, he had. Nevander narrowed his eyes at Castien.

The prince continued. “Well, since you were nowhere to be found when she and Wynna arrived yesterday evening, there wasn’t much I could do, now was there?”

Yesterday evening he’d been in another world. He was glad that no one could find him. An image of Kallessa, snowflakes drifting onto her dark hair and eyelashes, captured him again.

Wynna tugged on his sleeve. “I think you look much prettier without all that hair growing out of your face and head everywhere,” she declared.

Nevander chuckled. “I look prettier, hmm?”

Wynna nodded. “Mama said you looked like a vaga... vaga-bomb,” she repeated, stumbling over the word.

Nevander burst out laughing. “Oh Wynna, I missed you.”

“As have I, my little queen,” Castien said, rising gracefully from the chair. Akeela jumped down with a soft mew and trotted over to Wynna, circling her legs.

Castien smiled gently at Wynna, and in that moment, it struck Nevander with poignant clarity. She was Castien’s last connection to his brother, to Wynna’s father, the late Prince Dane.

Wynna’s face became serious as she looked at Castien. “Uncle Cas, why do you look so skinny?”

“Ah, a child’s honesty,” Castien murmured. He squatted down next to Wynna, barely concealing a groan. “I’m getting old and pining for my little Wynna these past two years.”

Wynna giggled and hugged Castien. “I love you, uncle Cas.”

Nevander watched Castien as he gently wrapped his too thin arms around Wynna, watched his eyes go bright, watched his throat bob as he swallowed back unshed emotions. “I love you too, sweet girl.”

This was one time when Kallessa wished Dovina would come crashing into her room and tell her what to wear. She rifled through the dresses in the wardrobe for the fifteenth time, all of them coming up short. Too frilly, too bright, too formal. None felt right.

Kallessa swung around and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was still a wild mass of curls and her cheeks were bright with nerves. She yanked the window sash open, letting in a cool breeze.

Be yourself. It's just tea with a princess. No big deal.

She took a shuddering breath and grabbed a simple cotton day dress from the closet. Dark maroon ribbons trimmed the ecru frock, modest and unembellished. She slipped it over her head, laced up the sides, and twisted her curls into simple braids atop her head. Her favorite calfskin ankle boots completed the look.

Kallessa retrieved the large box containing her split skirts, her future, her ticket to freedom, and stepped into the hall, flagging down a maid.

"Could you please direct me to the east parlor?"

"Of course, my lady, right this way."

Her heart ratcheted higher in her chest until they paused before the open door. Kallessa took a deep breath, trying to calm the frantic fluttering of her pulse.

Princess Ciana was soft, and so beautiful Kallessa could only stare. Auburn waves cascaded down the princess's back, complementing an olive satin gown that set off her milky complexion to perfection. A pang of envy shot through Kallessa, quickly shoved aside as those hazel-green eyes met hers.

She rose and strode toward them, a sureness in her movements that must have come from being royalty, of never feeling a doubt about her station. Kallessa curtsied low, drawing her skirts to the side.

"My lady," Kallessa and the maid murmured in unison.

"Now, now, enough of that," Ciana said, dismissing the maid with a subtle nod. "You must be Lady Kallessa, am I correct?" Ciana asked, studying her face intently.

"Yes, my lady." Kallessa replied, lingering in the doorway.

"I am Ciana. Please, won't you join me?"

Princess Ciana settled in an upholstered red chair beside an ornate ebony table laden with pinafores, muffins and tiny red tarts. A large teapot sat on a silver tray, along with two dainty teacups. Kallessa's mouth watered. She hadn't eaten anything since before the masquerade party, which now seemed a lifetime ago.

She sat on the opposite side of the table in a golden velvet loveseat and placed her box beside her.

“Please, help yourself.” Ciana laughed, gesturing to the spread. “The staff outdid themselves. They must remember how much I used to eat when I was younger.”

“You are not eating, my lady?”

“Call me Ciana. May I call you Kallessa?”

“Of course, my lady, ah - Ciana.” It just felt wrong to address a princess that way.

Ciana smiled warmly and smoothed her embroidered skirts. “That’s much better. We’re just two women having tea, and talking shop, that’s all. No need for all this formality.”

Kallessa’s head spun at the princess’s casual demeanor. This defied every etiquette rule she’d ever learned.

As Ciana poured tea, Kallessa’s gaze wandered to the princess’s bare fingers. No rings. A widow’s hands.

“Cream or sugar?” Ciana asked.

“Both please,” Kallessa replied, finally finding her voice, though it came out barely above a whisper.

Ciana handed her a cup and a plate for the pastries.

“You must help me eat some of this food or Cook will be upset with me.” Ciana smiled wryly.

This is not what she expected at all from a princess. Where was all the formality, the protocol, the icy superiority?

But, if the princess wanted help to eat all that wonderful food on the table, who was she to argue? Kallessa layered her plate with an assortment of treats and sat back in the loveseat. As she nibbled on a muffin, Ciana sipped her tea, then addressed her as if they’d been friends for ages.

“My daughter Wynna and I ride almost every morning. I just love the wind in my hair, feeling the sturdy horse beneath me. But sitting side saddle makes it nearly impossible, and I would have never dreamed of doing anything different while married to Dane.”

Kallessa nodded, her mouth too full of muffin to reply. Dane, the future king of Krithadea. Yes, she’d been to his lonely grave only days ago.

A shadow passed over the princess’s eyes. “Two years ago, after my husband’s death, we returned to Vaston. I had a tailor fashion riding pants for myself and Wynna. Well, you can imagine the uproar that caused.”

A lady, no, a princess, wearing riding pants. If it was anything like the pushback she’d received from the merchants in Teansong, she could

imagine.

"So, I called on tailors to come up with a solution. They balked." Ciana leaned forward, eyes sparkling. "Then when I arrived yesterday evening, Castien told me about a wonderful lady here with the perfect design."

Ciana had been there since last night? Well, how would Kallessa have known? She and Nevander were hiding in their own world, made of glass and moonlight.

But she needed to concentrate. This could be her ticket to freedom. Aunt Gevene could buy all the silly trinkets she wanted. Maybe they could even fix the leaking roof. Dozens of images flashed before her.

It was only dimmed by the thought of doing all those things alone. She mentally shook herself. She had to leave Nevander out of her equation. He couldn't possibly be part of her future.

Kallessa placed her plate down, lifting the box lid with trembling hands. Pulling out her finest riding skirt, she stood to the side and flipped it so the layers fell into place.

"Full pockets with hidden closures are sewn into each side," she showed, "eliminating the need for a handbag." She flipped up the top layers, revealing the pants underneath.

"They appear to be a skirt, but they're split in the middle so the rider can sit on the horse astride with no problems. The top layers supply the modesty society expects by draping loosely over the under layers, concealing them completely."

Ciana's eyes burned with excitement. "May I?"

Kallessa handed over her hard work, her future, into the hands of the princess.

"Wynna will love this," Ciana said, examining the skirts, swishing them this way and that.

"How old is your daughter?" Kallessa asked.

Ciana looked up from digging her hands in the pockets. "She's nine years old. An amazing rider already. She can already beat Nevander in a fair race." Ciana laughed.

Kallessa's heart stuttered in her chest. "Nevander?" His name fell from her lips in a breathless whisper.

Ciana glanced up, brows knitting together. "My brother. He's been here all week. I'm sure you've seen him, although right now he's wearing that

ridiculous beard." A small frown creased her features as she studied the stitching on the skirts.

A wave of dizziness washed over Kallessa as the blood drained from her head. She felt faint, knees wobbling treacherously.

And a thousand tiny hints fell into place in a mere second.

"Prince Nevander Lionskye?" Her voice came out as a gasp, as if she'd been running uphill. He couldn't be. Not the man she'd spent the last two weeks with. Not the man who cradled her in his arms, and kissed her so tenderly mere hours ago. Not him.

Finally glancing up, Ciana met Kallessa's stunned gaze. "Yes, although he hates being called that." The princess's brow furrowed. She grasped Kallessa's trembling hands in her own. "Are you alright? You look terribly pale."

"I, I…" Kallessa stammered, the room spinning. Her heart pounded erratically in her chest, threatening to burst free from its bony cage.

Backing up, she finally managed a strangled response. "I'm fine." The words barely escaping her trembling lips. The walls closed in, suffocating her with each shallow breath. She had to get out of here. "I'm so sorry. Please excuse me."

Then she fled, her world tilting on its axis.

Kallessa careened toward her room, the once-familiar halls now seeming shadowy and unfamiliar. Every step felt heavier, like trudging through molasses, each heartbeat, the slam of a sledgehammer. She fumbled for the doorknob before finally swinging it open and stumbling inside. Tears she could no longer hold in blurred her vision.

She couldn't breathe. Her chest heaved as she gasped for air, fingers fumbling with the laces of her dress. Finally, she ripped it off, the fabric tearing under her desperate grip, slipping to the floor in a whisper that seemed to mock her.

How could she have been so stupid? Prince Nevander Lionskye? The royal scion of Dracia? The reality struck her with the ferocity of a lion's roar.

She had lost herself in a whirlwind of emotions, failing to see the truth right before her eyes. She'd been flouncing about, kissing a prince, telling everyone he was her fiancé, all the while thinking he was just a simple person like her. The chasm between their stations was now a gaping, impassable abyss.

A choked sob escaped her lips. Her body flushed from head to toe in a burning wave of shame that seared her soul. Nevander must have been laughing at her the whole time, reveling in her ignorance. He and that bloody Prince Castien had probably had plenty of laughs at her expense, mocking the silly, naive girl who dared to dream.

With shaking hands, she retrieved the only silver half crown she had from her purse. The profile etched on its surface was unmistakable, hauntingly familiar. Without the beard, she easily recognized the chiseled jawline of Prince Nevander Lionskye.

A torrent of stories and rumors she'd overheard about the famed prince throughout her life came crashing over her in a dizzying whirlwind as all the cryptic pieces of what he'd shared with her fell into place like tumblers in a lock. How could she have been so naïve, so utterly blind to the truth staring her in the face?

"A shipbuilder's son," she scoffed, her voice bitter in the empty room. Technically, he hadn't lied. King Oren Lionskye owned the largest shipyard in the world, a master shipbuilder in his own right.

With Princess Ciana's arrival, everyone would soon realize Nevander's true identity. *Why had he hidden it from her?* It didn't matter. She didn't belong among these people.

She had to get out of here. Maybe Dovina would be ready to go.

Not likely. Another wave of mortification crashed over her. She could just imagine the laughter of these people, gawking at her with noble disdain, their mocking whispers as their lips curled: *That's the pathetic pauper girl who pretended she was engaged to a prince.*

In a frenzy, she packed the smallest travel bag with a few simple dresses. She didn't even have any of her split skirts anymore. She'd ran so quickly from the room that she'd left them with Princess Ciana.

Once the princess discovered she was a fraud, she would probably burn them, anyway.

Her gaze fell upon the map of the estate on her desk, and she noticed a detail she'd overlooked before. In the bottom left corner, what she'd

thought was a decorative flourish was actually the profile of a lion, with a flourished ‘N’ inscribed inside. She instantly recognized the distinct shape of that initial. Nevander’s signature mark. He’d drawn this exquisite map.

Her hand hovered over the map, torn between the urge to rip it apart and the desire to keep this one tangible piece of her shattered dream. Before she could change her mind, she stuffed it into her bag. She needed something to remind her that this had been real, even if it was all based on a lie.

Pulling on her woolen cloak and sturdy shoes, she glanced out the window. The snow had stopped, a heavy blanket of silence over the world, a world she no longer felt she belonged to. She mournfully glanced at all the fine dresses left in the closet. Dovina could retrieve them for herself. She wouldn’t have room to take such reminders of her idiocy.

The urge to scream clawed at her throat, but she swallowed it down, drawing deep breaths to steel herself against the rising tide of panic and despair. She’d gotten herself into this mess; she would get herself out, no matter how bleak the path ahead looked. That would teach her to dream of something more than the crumbs life had allotted her thus far.

Checking that the hallway was clear, Kallessa rushed to Dovina’s room, her soft leather boots barely whispering against the granite floor. She tapped lightly on the ornately carved door, hoping against hope that her flighty cousin might still be there.

“Dovina? It’s me, Kallessa,” she called out in a hushed voice.

Silence greeted her. Pushing the door open wider, she found the room spotlessly clean, the gauzy curtains flung wide to admit the meager morning light.

Dovina was gone.

“Excuse me, my lady.” A maid’s voice startled Kallessa.

“Where is Dovina?” Kallessa asked, whirling to face the maid.

The maid’s blank look prompted Kallessa to clarify, impatience sharpening her tone. “The lady who was staying in this suite.”

“Oh,” comprehension dawned on the maid’s face, “she left yesterday, my lady.”

“What?” Kallessa felt the ground shift beneath her feet as the maid’s words registered. Dovina was gone? How could that be?

“Sorry, my lady, that’s all I know,” the maid offered with an apologetic shrug before turning to go about her duties.

Panic rising in her throat, Kallessa rushed to the stables, praying for a miracle, only to be met with the sight of the empty spot where the Wynlar carriage had been.

“I am an idiot,” she whispered, the words cutting deeper than the winter chill. Tears streamed down her face, dripping steadily onto the frozen earth.

She had dared to hope and had been cruelly reminded of her place.

Twenty-Nine

NEVANDER'S GAZE FLITTED TO the ornate clock on the mantelpiece. Its chimes echoed through Castien's suite, each toll a hammer blow to his chest. Eleven o'clock. Damn it. Time with his niece was precious, but he needed to find Kallessa. He owed her an explanation, no, the *real* explanation, for his deception.

Sure, he could use the excuse he was helping Castien, but that wasn't the real reason. The real reason, his mind shied away from every time he dared confront it.

For the past two years, since the brutal end of the Birazahian war, he'd been a shadow of himself. The horrors he'd witnessed, the lives lost under his command, had transformed him into someone he barely recognized. Someone he hated. Someone he'd run from at every opportunity.

But he had to stop running. And maybe it could start with Kallessa.

Across the room, Castien stoked the fire into a roar. Sweat beaded on Nevander's brow as the heat intensified. Wynna had stripped off her stockings and now ran around bare-legged, her giggles a stark contrast to the tension coiling in Nevander's gut.

"I'm having lunch with mother today." Castien's sigh cut through Nevander's thoughts. "She wants to go over the rest of the festival plans, since the snowfall halted today's preparations. Apparently, there's been trouble with a new butcher in the kitchen." He rolled his pale gray eyes.

Nevander nodded absentmindedly, only half paying attention to Castien. However, his reverie shattered when his sister, Ciana, swept into the suite, a

look of concern etched on her features. Her expression melted into relief when she saw Nevander.

"Finally! You've shaved off that hideous beard," she exclaimed, enveloping him in a lilac-scented embrace. Wynna trailed behind, eyes alight with curiosity as she peered up at her uncle.

"I told him you said he looked like a vaga-bomb," Wynna said to her mother.

Ciana bent down and hugged her daughter. "Good job, my little fox," she whispered, planting a kiss on Wynna's forehead.

Castien scowled. "Does no one knock around here? Last I checked, this was my personal quarters."

Both Ciana and Nevander ignored him.

"Well," Nevander sighed, running a hand over his smooth chin, "along with the removal of my beard, which was not," he arched an eyebrow at Castien, "entirely my idea, my cover is now blown."

Ciana furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?"

"I was sort of undercover, sis," Nevander admitted. "Though it seems my attempt at anonymity was short-lived."

"Why?" Ciana asked.

He didn't want to tell Ciana about Castien's suspicions in front of Wynna's innocent ears. "Maybe I just wanted to be a simple son of a shipbuilder for a while," he replied evasively.

Ciana studied him closely, her gaze piercing. After a moment, she said, "Well, that explains it."

"Explains what?" Nevander asked warily.

"Why that poor young lady almost fainted and ran from the parlor as if her petticoats were on fire at the mention that you were my brother," Ciana said.

Heat crawled up Nevander's neck as he glared at her. "That poor young lady's name wouldn't have been Kallessa, would it?" he ground out.

"Why yes, I believe it was," Ciana replied airily. "She has the most amazing idea for ladies' riding skirts. Quite innovative."

Nevander let out a low growl, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"All I did was mention your name. She put the two together. Who is she to you? And if you wanted your presence a secret, you should have told me."

He turned his anger inward. It wasn't Ciana's fault. It was his. He'd hated to deceive her, but what else could he have done? And they hadn't even uncovered a single credible lead on any suspects.

"Why were you having tea with her, anyway?" Nevander asked.

Ciana glanced at Castien.

Castien responded to Nevander. "Did Kallessa never share her ideas with you? I thought you two had gotten quite close."

Before he could respond, Castien glanced to Ciana, slyly grinning. "Nevander didn't tell you they were engaged?"

If Castien wasn't so sickly, Nevander would have punched him square in his smirking face.

"I leave you alone for two weeks, and you end up engaged?" Ciana pressed, her eyes wide. "Who is this woman?"

Nevander sighed and plopped down on a chair, rubbing his clean shaven face. "It was a fake engagement. Long story." He spoke through his hands, his voice sounding more like a moan. "What could she be thinking? I was about to tell her this morning before your page interrupted us. Now she must think the worst of me."

Ciana raised her eyebrows. "Maybe she doesn't know about your reputation."

"She's from Dracia," Nevander snapped, jumping up from the chair. "I have to go find her. Explain this mess."

Ciana grasped his arm. "Maybe you should just let her be. She seemed pretty out of sorts. If what you say is true and this was a fake relationship, then she may let it go."

Nevander's heart clenched at the thought. It was no longer fake to him. Of course, they weren't truly engaged, but Kallessa deserved far better treatment than this mess. "No. I have to at least try to explain." He pulled his arm free and strode toward the door.

"Can I go with you, Uncle Van?" Wynna asked, her small voice cutting through his thoughts.

He'd forgotten his niece, with ears like a cat. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, not right now. But maybe if things go well, you can meet her later, alright?" He saw Ciana and Castien exchange glances from the corner of his eye, but he didn't care. He had to find Kallessa before it was too late.

Kallessa's heart raced as she roamed the mews for the third time, but the Wynlar carriage was truly gone. Why would Dovina leave without her? And not even a goodbye? True, Kallessa had been nowhere to be found last night, but wouldn't Dovina at least have left a note? Silly, fickle girl. How did she expect Kallessa to get back home?

Then it struck her. Dovina thought Kallessa was engaged. Kallessa's bitter laugh echoed in the empty mews, startling a nearby horse. "Of course," she muttered, "why would an engaged woman need a ride home?"

She swallowed hard, forcing down the lump in her throat. This was no time for tears. She had to think, to plan.

Home. She needed to get home, to talk to Aunt Gevene. Maybe even convince Dovina to help her somehow. They'd made it this far, hadn't they?

Anything was better than staying here, surrounded by lies and false promises.

Kallessa strode out of the mews. The melting snow seeped into her soft shoes with each step, but she barely noticed the discomfort. Her mind was too busy replaying every moment, every touch.

Every lie.

"Why did he have to be a prince?" she hissed through clenched teeth as she made her way to the barn. "Why couldn't he have been that simple son of a shipbuilder?"

Nevander's kindness, his gentleness, the way he'd made her feel valued, had all seemed so genuine. But how could it be? He was Prince Nevander Lionskye of Dracia. Men like that didn't fall for women like her. It had all been a game, a cruel joke at her expense.

Stepping into the barn, Kallessa sighed with a mix of relief and sorrow at the sight of Sunu. The mare raised her head as Kallessa approached. Of course, it had been easy for Nevander to give her the mare. He probably had hundreds more at home in his big, fancy castle.

But at this moment, she couldn't have been more grateful. If not for that gift, she would be stranded.

The same shy stable boy who'd helped her saddle up for her trip to the lake emerged from the tack room, dipping his head respectfully as he approached.

"How may I be of service, my lady?" he inquired.

Kallessa cleared her throat and smiled. "Sunu and I are going on a nice, long journey. Could you fill her saddle bags with oats?"

"Of course, my lady."

With efficient movements, he gathered the supplies and carefully packed them into the mare's saddlebags. Soon enough, all was in readiness. Gently urging Sunu forward, Kallessa guided the mare out of the barn's cool shadows and onto the winding trail that would lead them to the road beyond. The crisp air nipped at her cheeks, carrying with it the scent of snow and pine.

As they reached the main road, slushy from the recent snowfall, Kallessa allowed herself one last look back. Ravenbluff estate sat on the rise, its grand silhouette framed by increasingly bare trees. In the distance, she could just make out the vineyard and the lonely grave that stood as a silent sentinel.

She looked up to the top of the estate, where a huge brass cylinder winked back at her against the dim sky. The telescope. Nevander had promised to show her the moon. Another broken vow to add to the list.

Kallessa felt the ache building behind her eyes, threatening to spill over. But she wouldn't give in, not now. With a determined set to her jaw, she turned her back on Ravenbluff estate and faced the long road ahead.

Nevander stood rooted in the middle of Kallessa's room, his heart pounding against his ribcage. She was gone. Of course she was. After realizing she'd spent time alone with one of Dracia's most infamous rakes, why wouldn't she run?

Disgust rolled over him in waves. Not only had he failed his men so utterly in war, but he'd come back home a broken man, wallowing in self-pity until he was nothing but a wastrel and a rake. Was that truly who he'd become?

The coat he'd draped over her shoulders mere hours ago now hung on the chair, a forlorn reminder of their last encounter. The room felt empty, devoid of her presence, except for a few dresses hanging limply in the wardrobe and that elusive scent of canary blossoms.

He stalked to the hallway, his boots thudding heavily against the polished granite floors, and made his way to Dovina's suite. Empty, just like Kallessa's. So they'd both left, disappearing without a word.

A bitter taste filled Nevander's mouth as he turned and retreated down the corridor. Maybe it was for the best. Why would Kallessa, sweet, vibrant Kallessa, want to shackle herself to someone as irreparably broken as he was, anyway? His gruesome tales of war must have horrified her.

If he'd only minded his own business and done what he'd come for, he could've left no worse for wear than when he'd arrived.

He scoffed. Who was he kidding? He was a wreck, and two short weeks in the countryside wouldn't mend the gaping wounds left by war and his own self-destructive choices.

But that one blissful night with Kallessa had brought a fleeting sense of tranquility that he hadn't felt in over two agonizing years. Her soft touch, gentle smiles, her warmth and kindness had soothed his turmoil, if only for a few precious hours.

What if he could explain himself to her? Didn't he deserve a chance to tell her he wasn't using her for amusement? But they both admitted it was fake. Yet, it didn't feel fake. Not when her eyes met his, not when she'd listened to his darkest confessions without judgment. Why did the thought of never seeing her face again make his chest constrict with panic?

He stormed out of Ravenbluff Estate, his boots pounding against the stone steps. The crisp morning air bit at his skin, but he barely noticed. He had to see for himself if she was truly gone.

Sure enough, the Wynlar carriage was missing. He wanted to mount the fastest horse and chase after them. They couldn't be that far ahead.

Indecision and helplessness grated on his nerves, his body vibrating with unspent energy. Clenching his jaw, he spun on his heels and headed toward the barracks.

Declan stood at the door, his piercing gaze fixed on the distant hills of the rolling landscape. His arms were crossed tightly over his broad chest, muscles tensed beneath the fabric of his tunic. As Nevander approached, Declan turned, raising a brow quizzically.

“Is it true?” Declan asked.

Had Declan heard already? Nevander stalked past him, straight into the ring, stripping off his coat and slinging it on the nearest bench.

Declan strode up behind him. “Is she here?” his deep voice rough.

Nevander’s jaw clenched. His silence stretched, anger shooting through his veins.

Declan huffed a breath, standing like a statue until Nevander donned his leathers and took up his sword.

Facing Declan in the center of the sparring ring, the question nagged at him. Why would Declan care if Kallessa was here? Suspicion took root.

Narrowing his eyes, Nevander asked, “Who?”

Declan’s face reddened, his freckled skin turning blotchy. “The princess,” he said between gritted teeth.

Nevander wanted a fight, craved the physical release and mental clarity that came from sparring. Did he want one enough to provoke the captain of the guard? A grim eagerness settled over him, a reckless determination taking root. Yes.

Yes, he did.

Anything to drown out the echoes of Kallessa’s laughter, to forget the softness of her skin under his fingertips.

He curled his lip and shrugged his shoulder, the motion causing a twinge of pain from his old wound. This was going to hurt like the seven hells. With a defiant glint in his eye, he readied himself for the clash to come. “Yes, and has already screwed up my day.”

Declan’s gaze sharpened, locking onto Nevander with an intensity that sent a chill down his spine. A malicious grin spread across Declan’s face as he advanced, sliding his blade loose from its scabbard with a deadly ring.

Thirty

THE ROAD OUT OF Shemmar snaked away from Ravenbluff, winding its way through a bleak landscape. Muddy slush stretched endlessly, swallowed by the horizon where gray sky met skeletal trees. Every rock, blade of snow-laden grass, and bend seemed alien, shadows in an unfamiliar world.

Kallessa's stomach churned. In her twenty-two years, she'd never ventured this far from home. Loneliness settled deep within her bones, colder than the biting wind that whipped at her cloak.

Two hours had passed since she'd left. The day has warmed slightly, but a chilly breeze still cut through her clothes, sending shivers racing across her arms and chest. Was this foolish? She wasn't even sure where the next inn was located. The deserted roads offered no one to ask for directions.

Dovina's abrupt departure gnawed at her. She hadn't seen her cousin at the masquerade ball, but with the myriad of colorful masks and elaborate costumes, Kallessa could have easily missed her. And, honestly, she'd been so distracted by Nevander that Dovina could have stomped on her foot and Kallessa probably wouldn't have noticed.

Dovina was only seventeen. Maybe she should have kept a better eye on her. It was easy to forget how young Dovina was sometimes by the way she acted. Kallessa had been just as uncertain at that age, still relying on her parents for guidance. At least, until they were gone.

She rubbed Sunu's head, her thoughts a maelstrom. Uncle Talos had bragged about selling the entire herd to the royal family. How had she not

connected the dots when Nevander spoke of his brother buying Sunu? The chances of spending two weeks with the Prince of Dracia and not knowing it seemed impossible. Yet here she was, the biggest idiot in the kingdom. Nausea rolled through her again as she thought of her last sight of his troubled face before it had all crashed down.

Kallessa nudged Sunu into a trot, widening the space between her and Ravenbluff Estate. She just wanted to forget the last two weeks. To focus on home, the humble cottage by the ocean where the salty sea breezes danced through the windows, Aunt Gevene's absent minded antics and silly stories. She forced the memories to the forefront, forced the nostalgia she craved. Yet, the familiar comfort of those things now left her feeling cold and hollow inside.

Nevander draped his battered body across the settee in the library, every muscle screaming in protest. The roaring fire cast flickering shadows, each one a memory of Kallessa. Had it only been weeks since they were trapped behind that very fireplace? Since they'd shared a kiss that still burned on his lips?

He tilted his head back, squeezing his eyes shut. The ghost of her touch haunted him, a phantom warmth in the growing chill of her absence. Never again. He'd probably never see her again, much less feel the softness of her lips against his. If his body wasn't a map of bruises and aches, he'd leave right now. Maybe just board a ship and sail off to uncharted waters, never returning.

Instead, he stayed there, the cushions lulling him along with the heat from the fire. Could he ever let go of the violence? Why did he have to beat himself to exhaustion before he could calm his thoughts?

It hadn't been like that with Kallessa. She'd calmed his mind like a good fight calmed his body. Her presence was a sanctuary he never knew he craved until he found himself without it.

What would he do now? Provoke Declan to beat the crap out of him daily? The thought held a certain dark appeal, but every muscle and joint in his body cried out against it. His shoulder throbbed sharply with every

heartbeat, a constant reminder of Declan's fury. He chuckled darkly at the memory of Declan's merciless rage. The captain hadn't held back in the slightest. They used to fight like that, he and Castien—so evenly matched that neither could ever get the upper hand. Now…

He saw Castien's thin pale arms wrapped around Wynna again, and it made him want to break something.

A soft tap on the doorframe yanked him from his brooding. Nevander's eyes fluttered open, even that slight movement sending tendrils of pain through his skull. While he'd been lost in thought, night had fallen. Wind whistled down the chimney, and unbidden, his mind raced to Kallessa. Where was she now? Was she safe? She and Dovina weren't traveling alone. The coachmen would protect them. They had to.

Ciana glided in, her olive gown shimmering like liquid gold in the firelight. She shoved his feet off the settee, his boots hitting the floor with a thud that reverberated through his battered body. She settled beside him, her eyes lost in shadow, her face a canvas of flickering emotions as she gathered her thoughts. A log shifted and crackled in the hearth, sending sparks swirling up the chimney.

"Dane spent hours in this room, planning for his rule of the kingdom when the time came," Ciana said.

Nevander studied his sister. She so rarely spoke of Dane, of her time spent at the estate, that he knew almost nothing about it. And in the time since he'd returned from war, he hadn't cared. His own pain had consumed him.

"I can count on one hand the amount of minutes I was allowed here. Except for the one time…"

He'd known this space was off-limits to Wynna, but it had never occurred to him that the same restrictions might have applied to Ciana. That this room, which should have been as much hers as any other part of the estate, had been forbidden territory.

Ciana glanced about, her face pale in the golden light. "It hasn't changed a bit." She laughed. "But why would it?" She waved a hand to a dark desk gleaming in the dim light. "I can tell you that there is a gouge out of the woodwork of that desk, and how it got there. I can tell you why there's a red wine stain on the carpet that won't come clean under that lamp stand. I can tell you there's a hidden room behind the fireplace."

Nevander knew all too well about that hidden room, but he held his tongue. The pain etched on his sister's features kept him silent.

"Yet I tried to stay away from here as much as possible." She slumped back against the settee, running her hand across the green velvet fabric. "I've never even sat on this couch. It's comfortable."

They lapsed into silence, both staring into the dancing flames. Even though the two could bicker as much as the next set of siblings, they both knew how to just be. His eyes fluttered close again. He was so tired. Yet just as he began to doze, his sister spoke.

"He's not getting better, is he?" Her voice was a murmur above the popping of the embers.

Worry that had been eating at him since his arrival came roaring back. Ever since seeing Castien for the first time in two years, the man who'd been transformed into an invalid.

Nevander shifted, wrapping his arm around Ciana. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I don't know what's wrong," he admitted, the words heavy on his tongue. "Shaydn left him on the road to recovery last year." He paused, swallowing hard. "I was shocked when I saw him."

"Me too."

Nevander shook his head. "Something is eating at him. He hardly eats, he roams the halls of this estate like a wraith at night. And he's so cold."

Ciana's voice was small, vulnerable. "Are we all falling apart?"

He glanced into her eyes, a more hazel shade of green than his own. "What do you mean?"

She huffed, a sound caught between a laugh and a sob. "For our kingdoms, we're sacrificing ourselves. And it's killing us."

He couldn't pretend ignorance.

"You," she poked him, her finger finding a bruise that made him wince, "went off to war, watched your men die, and came back a shadow of yourself."

Darkness edged its way into his vision. He didn't want to think about it. But Ciana pressed on, her voice growing stronger. "Castien saved his father, but lost his brother, the heir to the throne."

"And I," she whispered, "married a man who used me as a vessel for an heir. A duty I never fulfilled, and he despised me for it."

Rage bubbled up inside Nevander, a simmering fury that he'd thought hours spent sparring in the ring with Declan had beaten out of him, at least for one night. Wynna was a beautiful, bright child, but she wasn't the son and heir that Dane had desperately wanted.

Ciana kicked off her slippers, curling her feet under her. "Mother promised after I returned to Lionskye that she'd never allow another of her children to marry out of duty."

Never marry out of duty. The words echoed in Nevander's mind, bringing thoughts of his older brother, Myka, destined to be the next king of Dracia. The rift between Myka and his wife, Umina, was a chasm. They didn't even share a home anymore. Umina thrived in the city, while Myka retreated to their sprawling rural estate. Their young sons, Gavril and Janson, were shuffled back and forth like parcels, caught in the crossfire of their parents' estrangement.

And Tarrick, the middle child, couldn't keep still long enough to even consider finding love, always chasing the next thrill. Was it born from a deep-seated fear of crushing duty and obligation?

"Do you love her?" Ciana's abrupt question shattered the contemplative silence.

"Who?"

Ciana leveled him with a pointed stare, sitting up straighter as she looked down the slender bridge of her nose at him. There was a knowing glint in her eyes, one eyebrow arched in that infuriatingly superior way only an older sibling could master.

How could he love Kallessa? He'd known her for a mere two weeks. And yet... given time, he knew he could. Deeply. Purely. Completely.

Nevander averted his gaze, his voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know."

"Do you want to find out if you could?" Her question cut through his haze of denial, laying bare the truth he'd been grappling with.

With every fiber of his being, he wanted to. The realization was as terrifying as it was exhilarating.

"Yes," he breathed.

"Then why did you listen to me when I told you to let her go?"

Thirty-One

NEVANDER RAKED HIS FINGERS through his hair, his scalp tingling with the force of his frustration as he faced his sister. “Because I lied to her! I made her believe I was just a simple man.”

Ciana crossed her legs beneath her. “Aren’t you a man like any other, with feelings and desires?”

“No,” he retorted, frustration simmering. “I have responsibilities…” The words tasted bitter. Duty, his eternal shackles.

Ciana’s hand on his arm silenced his spiral. “Alright, what did you lie about? Did you make up a bunch of stories?”

Actually, he hadn’t. Every piece of himself he’d shared with Kallessa had been real, raw, and honest. It was just under false pretenses.

“No,” he admitted. “But at first it didn’t matter. It was only a two-week party, for goodness’ sake.” He paused, running a hand over his face. “And then there was that damn fake engagement—”

Ciana laughed. “Wait, you have to tell me what happened.”

Nevander shook his head. “It was that blasted Warwick Ratliff. He was harassing Kallessa, and you should have seen her, the desperation in her eyes. How could I not help her?” He let out a soft chuckle. “I have to admit I was shocked when she announced our engagement to Castien.”

Ciana howled with laughter. “Oh my, I need to get to know Kallessa. I think the two of us could be good friends.”

Nevander huffed before staring into the flames. “You would like her. She truly is a kind person.” Guilt gnawed at his insides. “I should have told her

the truth."

Ciana wiped moisture from her eyes with her fingertips. "Well, why didn't you?"

"Because that page interrupted us," Nevander said, but even as the words left his mouth, he knew it was weak.

His sister raised an eyebrow. "Oh, come on, you could have told the page to wait."

He could have.

He could have told the bloody page to go pound rocks, but he didn't. He'd used it as an excuse to have just a few more moments of that adoring expression on Kallessa's beautiful face.

It was fear, plain and simple. Fear of watching her face turn to scorn, or horror, or disgust. Watching any affection she'd formed for him burn to ashes and that golden light go out in her eyes.

"Because I'm an idiot," he finally said, kicking his feet back up onto the coffee table and burying himself in the cushions of the settee.

"That much is true," Ciana teased.

"Thanks, sis," he responded flatly, crossing his tired arms across his chest. He was going to be too sore to move if he didn't get a hot bath soon.

"I have a confession to make," Ciana spoke after a moment of silence.

Nevander raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

She flipped her long auburn hair behind her shoulder. "Castien and I have been corresponding about you for over a year."

So that's what those covert looks shared between Castien and Ciana had been about. But before Nevander could get upset over their meddling, she held up her hand. He heaved a sigh and shut his mouth.

His sister's eyes went soft. "I was worried about you. When you came back from the war with your arm in a sling, I knew your body would heal. I wasn't so worried about that. You're young and healthy."

She blinked and looked away from him, her gaze settling on the shadowless evening outside. "It was when I looked into your eyes that I knew something was very wrong." She turned back to Nevander, her eyes shimmering with tears. "My brother was missing. And left in his place was this hollow shell. A person who responded when spoken to, who smiled when required, but was empty."

She jumped up and grabbed the poker, stirring the embers back to life before turning. "And then you went off with Tarrick, of all people, drinking

yourself into a stupor, and only goodness knows what else."

Nevander sank deep into the cushions, wishing the plush velvet could swallow him whole and shield him from Ciana's probing words. She didn't need to know the sordid details of what he'd done during those dark times in the aftermath of the war - the reckless bouts of drunkenness, the numbing oblivion he sought in brothels, the self-destructive rage that consumed him. He'd been desperately trying to forget those memories himself.

Now his sister was dredging it all back up from the murky depths where he'd submerged it. All this time, he'd deluded himself into thinking his carefully constructed facade had fooled everyone around him.

"When Castien wrote me, I clung to the hope he might help you, because I certainly couldn't. And I refused to let you go down the path of destruction. So, we devised a plan to get you away from home."

She turned away from him, replacing the poker on its stand. "I just couldn't watch you destroy yourself and feel so helpless to do anything about it." Her shoulders slumped, her back still to him as she spoke quietly, "I love you, Nevander. And if anyone deserves happiness, you do."

Kallessa's berated herself once more as the shadowless afternoon slipped toward evening. What had she been thinking? At least they'd ridden past the snow, and the roads were dry, but she hadn't even brought food. Her stomach growled in protest as she stopped by a stream, gulping the icy water while Sunu grazed on autumn grasses. They had to find shelter before dark.

On the way to Ravenbluff, the inns had been evenly spaced for a carriage. One had to be near. Despite her late start, Sunu was faster than any carriage. Kallessa's heart leaped as she crested the next rise, an inn materializing in the distance. She nudged Sunu into a trot, and the mare, sensing rest and food ahead, needed little encouragement.

At the inn, Kallessa quickly scanned the stables, hoping to spot the Wynlar carriage. Nothing. Nausea chased away her hunger. Well, they could be a full day ahead. Maybe they stopped at the next inn. Weariness weighed on her as she handed Sunu off to the stable boy, one of her few precious

copper coins in his hand. She could survive on next to nothing, but Sunu needed strength and rest.

Darkness fell as Kallessa pushed open the inn's door. Shemmar was off the main road to the capital, so this inn wasn't very busy, which was just as well. She didn't want to answer a lot of questions.

The innkeeper glanced at her, then the door, before frowning.

"Is it just you, miss?" The Krithadean man's disapproval was palpable.

"Oh, ah, my companions are on their way. They should arrive within the hour." She forced a smile, earning her a grudging half-smile in return.

He didn't believe her.

"I have the coin, though. I was sent ahead to secure a room."

His grimace softened slightly as she retrieved her pouch. She may be a woman alone, but money was still money.

"Ye have your choice this evening. Only one other guest. Second floor room overlooking the barn, or main floor beside the fireplace."

A fireplace was tempting, but privacy and keeping an eye on Sunu won out. "Second floor, please."

"Twelve coppers," the innkeeper demanded, his gaze sharp.

Kallessa nearly dropped her purse at the outrageous sum, but years of negotiating with seasoned merchants steadied her expression. If she could bargain with the best traders in the bustling markets of Teansong, she could certainly haggle with this cantankerous old man.

Taking a deep breath, she countered, "Seven coppers."

His eyes narrowed to slits. "Ten."

"Eight," she said, holding her ground.

He harrumphed loudly. "There isn't anywhere else to go this time of night. Nine coppers, and that's final."

Seizing one last opportunity, Kallessa asked, "Does it include supper?"

Exasperated, he relented. "For you, miss. Of course."

Her stomach cramped in gratitude. "Then done." She counted out the coppers, her purse feeling alarmingly lighter. She needed to make better time tomorrow. Only funds for one more night remained.

The innkeeper shuffled over on a crippled leg, wear and age etched into his face. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, pointing with a stubby finger. "It's the last door at the end of the hall."

Before she ascended the stairs, he placed a large tarnished key in her hand, its metal cold against her palm.

“Do you want supper in your room or in the main hall?” he asked, eyeing her travel-worn appearance.

Kallessa just wanted to fall into bed and let the weariness of the road slip away. “My room, please,” she replied, stifling a yawn.

“I’ll have Millie send it up shortly.” He paused, his faded eyes falling on hers, concern etched in the surrounding creases. “Keep the door locked, miss.” With that warning lingering, he stumped his way back to the counter and out of sight, his uneven gait echoing in the empty space.

The room was a shadowy, cold cave even with the lamps turned up. A small bed shoved in the corner had a wool coverlet and soft flannel sheets covering it and appeared to be clean. At least she wouldn’t wake up with bedbugs. She shivered. Cool night air seeped in around the small window overlooking the stable as promised. Maybe she should have chosen the room by the fireplace.

A knock on the door made her jump.

“Here’s your dinner, miss.”

Kallessa opened the door to a diminutive woman, even smaller than herself, with silver hair in two braids over her shoulders. Calloused hands held a tray of food that smelled heavenly.

“Thank you.” Kallessa smiled, but the woman left without a word. She set the tray on the table and locked the door behind her.

A large hunk of brown bread sat next to a thick stew full of turnips and carrots and small bits of venison. A tankard of small beer chilled beside it. Her mouth watered at the sight.

She devoured the meal, scraping the last bit of stew out of the bowl with the bread, then drained the tankard. The bed beckoned, as her full stomach lulled her into drowsiness. Stripping to her chemise, she crawled into the flannel sheets, pulling the blankets high. Exhaustion overtook her, her dread of the upcoming days lost to a dreamless sleep, and Nevander’s name a whisper on her lips.

It was silent, so silent. Even the frigid winds that whistled down the Narian pass had calmed. Nevander stopped feeling the cold hours ago. Or was it

days ago? Time ceased to have meaning in this frozen wasteland. Bodies draped the vast landscape before him, blue and stiff in death. Snow drifted across warm puddles of crimson, melting, then refreezing.

His men lay dead. He'd failed them. From his vantage in the pit, the world was all slowly turning white. Friends, enemies, the snow covered them all indiscriminately.

Thirst clawed at his throat. His empty canteen was a cold, hard lump at his side, along with his spent musket and satchel. What if he closed his eyes? Only for a moment?

No! He couldn't.

Move or die. He dug raw fingers into the snow, struggling to rise. Shaking like a weakling, he climbed from the pit and stumbled back to the ship.

But the ship was gone.

In its place, on the frothy sea littered with black ice, floated a small female form, facedown in the undulating waves. Her long dark curls tangled with bracken, her indigo gown drenched and partly dragging her under. His feet stumbled over the slick rocks, every step in slow motion, time stretching in reverse. Wasn't he moving forward? He watched his boots, torn and bloodstained, as he tried to get to that floating body.

He turned, searching for footprints. There were none. Then he saw his body still in the pit, frozen under mounds of dirt, blood oozing from his shoulder.

Get up! He screamed. She needed him. Yet he lay there amongst the dead, waiting for daylight.

Yelling. Rumbling. Soldiers running...

Nevander woke, gasping, tearing at the blankets as if climbing from a grave. Moonlight cast unsettling shadows across the room. That nightmare, he'd had it so many times. But this time the ship was gone, and in its place was a body. The hair on his head rose and prickles ran down his body.

Kallessa. Her body floating lifeless in the icy sea.

Panic propelled him from the bed. What if she was hurt? He had to find her. Even if she left on her own.

Yelling from the hallway jolted him into action. He yanked on trousers and tunic, not bothering with laces, and ripped open the door.

A guard rushed past, shoving a maid aside in his urgency. Nevander followed, giving the maid an apologetic look as he, too, ran past. His gut

twisted with each turn, leading to the family suite.

Declan's sharp gaze caught his as he rounded the corner to Castien's bedchamber. The doors gaped open, every lamp blazing. On the floor lay Castien, twisted unnaturally, a fireplace poker still gripped in his hand.

Nevander shoved past the guards gathered in the doorway, his heart pounding. He knelt at Castien's side, dread coiling in his stomach. But Castien still breathed, his chest rising and falling rapidly, pulse fluttering against pale skin. Blood smeared from a split lip and his eyes were black and swollen. Beaten within an inch of his life.

"Get him to a bed! Don't just stand there, you idiots. Declan!" Nevander barked, his voice cracking with urgency. The soldiers remained rooted in place. Nevander gritted his teeth, the metallic taste of rage flooding his mouth. He didn't rule here, had no authority over these men.

He should have prevented this. He'd failed Castien, just as he'd failed his men. Failure, failure, failure—the mantra pounded through him, his breath sawing in and out as he stared at Castien's battered body.

Declan gripped his arm, fingers digging in. "Van, get a hold of yourself," he whispered.

Nevander clenched his jaw, struggling to regain his composure. He'd led men through countless battles, suffered through days and nights of uncertainty and guilt, but he was here right now. And right now he had a chance to help.

He could do this. Shoving away the spinning thoughts trying to drag him down, he flicked his eyes to the captain.

"Do I have your permission to take over?" Nevander asked. Declan's dark blue eyes bored into his. After a tense moment, he gave a sharp nod.

"Everyone do as Prince Nevander commands. That's an order!"

Nevander straightened, projecting authority despite the turmoil raging within. "Cut his clothes away so we can assess the injuries. When did this happen?"

A soldier stepped forward. "Not sure, my lord. Perhaps in the past hour."

Nevander gritted his teeth. Anything could happen in an hour. "Have we secured the queen's whereabouts?"

And what about Ciana and Wynna?

He pointed at two soldiers. "Help me with the prince. The rest of you search every room. Report back immediately." He turned to Declan. "Find Ciana and Wynna."

Declan paled and bolted from the room.

Nevander directed the soldiers as they carefully cut away Castien's clothes, revealing a body battered and bruised.

Thin, so thin. He wanted to clench his fists until they cut through his palms. Instead, his touch was feather light as he checked for breaks and straightened Castien gently. His skin was like ice.

"Carry him to the bed and cover him with blankets," Nevander ordered. Once Castien was on the plush bed, he stoked the fireplace into a roaring blaze.

Ciana burst into the room, eyes wide, Declan close behind. Her hair fell in disarray to her waist, her green robe hastily tied.

"Where's Wynna?" Nevander asked.

"Still asleep with a guard at her door." She looked down at Castien and gasped, a hand flying to her mouth. "Was he attacked?"

"I think so," Nevander replied grimly.

"By who?"

"I don't know. He suspected the poisoner was still at large. That's why he asked me to come. I should have been looking harder."

Ciana placed a hand on his arm. "We'll find who did this, but right now, he needs us."

"I've sent word to the capital," Declan said, his eyes flicking between Castien and Ciana.

Declan had been here when Dane was killed, when Castien was poisoned. Perhaps Nevander had been going about this all wrong.

"Declan, you and Ciana are the smartest people I know, besides Castien, and he's no help right now. You two scour this place for clues. I'll stay by Castien's side."

He'd be damned if he let another man die on his watch.

Thirty-Two

THE FIRST SENSE TO register in Kallessa's groggy mind was the smell. Damp wood and ozone. The second was her body, curled tightly into a ball, cramping all over. Forcing her eyes open, she saw pale light glimmering through the small window, her breath fogging the air.

It was freezing. Why hadn't she taken the room by the fireplace? Had she thought she'd watch the stables in her sleep? She groaned as she unwound her limbs and stretched. The untouched parts of the bed were icy, and she shrieked with shock. Hopefully, Sunu had slept better than she had.

Rushing through her morning routine, she brushed her hair and splashed frigid water on her face. Shivering, she donned a linen dress, tugged two pairs of thick woolen stockings over her calves, and laced up sturdy leather boots. Her wool cape did little to warm her pink nose and she rubbed it vigorously.

After packing her meager belongings, she made her way downstairs, the old wooden steps creaking beneath her feet.

Embers glowed in the hearth and she stopped for a moment to warm her hands before searching for the innkeeper.

"Hello?" she called into the quiet. Pans rattled in the kitchen, the pungent scent of coffee wafting her way as she curled her lip. She hated coffee, but if it was hot and gave her some much needed energy, she would drink it.

In the kitchen, the small old woman from last night kneaded a ball of dough on a scarred wooden table, humming quietly. Her faded gray tunic fit loosely on her slight frame, but her forearms were wiry with strength.

Kallessa tapped on the open door, startling a warm smile from the woman. “Are ye leaving?”

Kallessa hesitantly walked in, pausing by the table. “Yes. Could I buy some provisions and a hot cup of coffee before I go?”

The old lady shrugged and wiped her hands on a towel she had draped over her shoulder. She stopped by the stove and poured black liquid from a pot into a mug before placing it before Kallessa with a thud. “What will you be needing, then?”

Kallessa sipped the acrid liquid, half choking on the intense flavor. It was like drinking liquid smoke, and it clung to her tongue and throat, not wanting to let go. She coughed, her eyes watering.

The old lady doubled over, wheezing with laughter. “Oh, I’m sorry, my lady. Should’ve warned you. You’ll stand a full inch taller after a cup of Millie’s coffee. It’s the only thing to get my husband out of bed.”

“I admit, I’m usually a tea drinker,” Kallessa croaked, wiping her eyes.

Millie’s cheeks were still creased with mirth as she re-secured the pins in her tight bun. “Wait til you get old. Only coffee will do. What did you say you needed?”

If Kallessa planned to be home in two days, she only needed enough to get her and Sunu through. They should be fine after that. If not, she’d have to make do. Her money would be gone.

“Enough for me and my horse for two more days.”

“Where are your companions?”

Kallessa sipped more of the horrid coffee as she tried to conjure an answer to Millie’s question. But a traitorous tear rolled down her cheek instead.

Millie patted her arm gently with a callused palm. “Was it a man, dear?” she asked softly.

Nevander’s face flashed in Kallessa’s mind, with those blasted spring green eyes and warm smile. Not only a man, but a prince of her own country. Embarrassment and loss rolled through in a fresh wave.

Swallowing hard, Kallessa shook her head slowly. “I’m sorry, I’m not usually like this.”

Millie waved dismissively. “Don’t you worry, dear. Drink your coffee and I’ll pack you a bag for the road.”

“How much do I owe you?”

She smacked her towel on the table and shook her head. “I don’t want your money. Just remember old Millie, and her kindness.”

Kindness from a stranger in a strange land, when her own people shunned her. “Thank you,” she whispered hoarsely. “I will not forget you.”

After sitting before the fireplace and drinking the potent coffee, Kallessa almost felt like she could tackle this day ahead of her. She vibrated with energy almost to the point of shaking, her body no longer cold or aching.

She headed to the stables, where Sunu stood brushed and saddled, the stable boy beaming with pride.

“I’ve never taken care of a royal horse before. She’s a beauty, my lady.” The lad bowed, sweeping his hat from his head.

Trepidation coursed through Kallessa. “H-how do you know it's a royal horse?”

“By the brand, of course. Are you a princess?” He pointed to a faint lion and shield brand on Sunu’s flank.

Suddenly, all that coffee burned in her throat. It had never occurred to her that Sunu would be marked. If anyone found out about this, they might think she stole her.

Kallessa smiled conspiratorially at the boy. “It’s a secret.” She dropped a halfpenny in his hand. “You can keep a secret, can’t you?”

His eyes grew round. “Of course, my lady.”

“That’s good. Well, I must go, the prince awaits.” Trotting out, she waved, while dying a little more on the inside.

By midday, the once sunny sky had dimmed to a dull gray, and a steady drizzle fell. Kallessa wiped her nose with damp hands. Her hair hung in lank ringlets from under her hood and her toes ached with cold. The surrounding woods had grown silent, save for the rustle of golden leaves dropping in the sullen mist.

Angry purple clouds gathered on the horizon ahead. She slid her hand along Sunu’s neck, soothing the mare.

She’d only passed two other travelers, a man with a cart of pelts, and a lone soldier, his eyes narrow with suspicion. Surely they'd reach the Dracian border soon. Why did it seem so much longer than before? Maybe because she’d been in a comfortable carriage and not sore and cold and wet.

Her throat felt scratchy, and the energy from the coffee had left her. She sagged, pulling her cloak closer, glancing up at the ever darkening sky.

What time was it, anyway? It could have been noon or evening by the looks of it. They had to go faster.

"How about a little gallop to warm us up?" she suggested to Sunu. The mare's ears flicked in response. Kallessa squeezed her flanks, holding on as they sped up.

Finally, the Dracian border loomed ahead, guardhouses flanking a rope across the path. Why hadn't she remembered this from before? Because she'd been riding in that cozy carriage with the Wynlar crest. Of course, they wouldn't have bothered them.

She slowed Sunu to a walk. Flipping her cloak out behind her, she covered the brand on Sunu's flanks. No ownership papers. Who would have thought she'd need them?

A stout soldier in a tan uniform exited the left guard house, a steaming mug in his fist. Oh, what she wouldn't do for something hot right now. He took a long slurp before blocking her path.

He raised his bushy eyebrow, looking her over with a critical gaze. "Where might ye be headed, lass?" he asked gruffly.

"Back to Teansong, my home." Kallessa swallowed hard.

He studied her. "Take down your hood, miss."

Trembling, she did as he said, letting her curls tumble free. Kallessa pushed the unruly locks back, offering the man a tremulous smile.

"Name?"

"Kallessa," she replied, her mouth suddenly dry. What was going on here? Were there tensions on the border for some reason?

"Surname?"

Fear lanced down Kallessa's spine and before she could second-guess herself, the name tumbled from her lips. "Dahoko."

The soldier retreated to the guardhouse. Kallessa's heart pounded. There was no reason to feel afraid. She'd done nothing wrong.

Finally, he reemerged, removed the rope, and waved her on. "One word of advice, miss. Bad weather's coming. Find a place to stay soon."

"Thank you, sir. I will." She trotted past, refusing to turn around until out of sight. Relief mixed with unease as she nudged Sunu into a canter.

Two hours later, the drizzle had become a steady rain, slowing their pace. Kallessa shivered, her soaked cloak clinging uncomfortably as she hunched over Sunu's neck, trying in vain to shield herself from the relentless

downpour. Water dripped off the tip of her nose, and she was having difficulty seeing more than a few yards in front of them.

Kallessa's head was aching. It'd begun with a dull throb behind her eyes that was now intensifying into stabbing pains. She closed her eyes, pressing her palms against her eyelids. They had to stop, whether she wanted to or not. Her fingers ached from gripping the reins, her hip muscles pulling with every sway of Sunu's flanks.

Guiding Sunu off the path to a brook, she dismounted with an unladylike grunt. Underneath the meager shelter of an overgrown shrub, she fed the mare an apple and two oatcakes, then let her graze on the damp grass. Kallessa grabbed a biscuit and a thick slice of hard cheese and plopped to the wet ground, not caring about her state of dress. She shoved the food in her mouth, following it with a drink of water from her flask. Oh, what she wouldn't do for a hot cup of bergamot like the one she'd shared with Nevander.

What would the prince think of her now? Bedraggled and dirty, her hair in wet tangles? Probably be appalled. She'd just been a game to him. A distraction.

Heaving a sigh, Kallessa rose, every part of her body aching. They had to keep going, or risk being caught out in the open after nightfall.

Suddenly, Sunu's ears flattened, her nostrils flaring. In the distance, the ricochet of hooves and men's shouts echoed off the surrounding woods. An instinctive sense of danger surged within her. Quickly, she tugged Sunu into the dense woods, crouching behind a fallen log.

Through the tangled underbrush, she could see only a sliver of the road. She stayed silent, not daring to move as the thundering hoofbeats grew closer. Kallessa gasped, a stray blade of grass scratching her face.

It was the soldiers from the border.

Thirty-Three

"THE QUEEN IS MISSING."

Nevander's head snapped up, dread flooding his veins. How long had they been gone? How long had he stared at Castien's still form, willing him to move?

Declan's sharp eyes scanned the room, meticulously noting every detail. The silence stretched, unbearable. "Anything else?" Nevander demanded.

"And so is one of the kitchen staff," Declan replied, his lips a thin line, his expression grim.

Nevander's mind raced. Hadn't Castien mentioned problems with the butcher just yesterday? "What's being done?"

"The entire guard is scouring the estate," Declan said, striding to the bed.

Nevander turned back to Castien. His breathing was still erratic, his chest rising and falling in an uneven rhythm, and his skin icy to the touch. If Castien didn't survive this, Lyra would be shattered. She'd already buried one son. And if they couldn't locate her...

Sunlight sliced through the clearing storm clouds, a stark contrast to the darkness weighing on his mind.

Nevander's gaze swept the room, landing on Castien's ink-stained mahogany desk, usually a chaos of papers and books, now eerily empty. His gut tightened.

"Where is Ciana?"

"She took Wynna for a horseback ride to keep her safe," Declan replied, leaning against the doorframe. "She also wanted to look around the estate."

“She what?” Nevander glared at Declan. “Have you lost your mind?” Nevander lunged for the door, but Declan’s iron grip on his bad shoulder stopped him cold. Pain shot up his neck.

“Princess Ciana is the highest-ranking person here now. Not you,” Declan stated, his calm voice grating. “She has six sentries with her.”

Nevander wrenched his shoulder out of Declan’s grip and glared at him. Pain throbbed down to his fingertips. That was just like Ciana, not waiting for permission, doing what she thought needed to be done.

“Fine,” Nevander said flatly.

Declan raised one eyebrow before continuing. “She also said for you to keep watch over Castien.”

Nevander narrowed his eyes. “Was that an *order*?”

A grim smile played at the corners of Declan’s lips. “Yes, I believe it was.”

Hours crawled by as the sky darkened and lamps flickered to life. Nevander’s legs had gone numb, his eyes aching as he kept vigil. They’d halted the festival with a fabricated story about the prince’s minor illness, but all Nevander could do was watch helplessly as Castien writhed in his sleep, caught in what looked like a nightmare.

Another groan tore from Castien’s throat. Nevander knew that kind of torment all too well. As he reached out, Castien jerked violently, kicking off the blankets. Sweat soaked his flushed skin, and his gasps for air filled the room.

Leaning in to check for fever, Nevander caught a fist to the gut. Stumbling back, he barely stifled a curse, coughing out a breath. How could Castien still punch so hard? He was nothing but skin and bones. But he still had fight in him. Good.

Snapping into action, Nevander yelled for the sentry. The guard burst in, concern etched on his face.

“Fetch the healer,” he ordered the sentry, who disappeared in a staccato of boots.

If Castien didn’t want the blankets on him, Nevander would leave them off. He yanked the blanket from the floor and folded it at the foot of the bed before he flopped down in a chair. The prince had calmed somewhat, but still hadn’t opened his eyes. Minutes rolled by as he watched for any sign, his eyelids fluttering with fatigue, his gut still aching where Castien had punched him.

His last night's sleep had been interrupted by his own bad dreams of darkness and cold. And Kallessa. Face down in the frigid waters. He swallowed, an uneasy feeling creeping up his throat. No, that was just a dream. She'd be fine.

She and Dovina had to be close to home by now, back to her life before him. Before she'd ever met a broken down soldier with too much violence in his heart, a whore mongering prince. She'd be better off without him.

Anger welled up from that bottomless depth, that endless reservoir of fury he constantly fought down. If not for this chaos, he could go after her. Ciana's words echoed in his mind. *Do you love her? Then why did you listen when I told you to let her go?*

Because he never deserved her in the first place.

Kallessa wanted to cry with relief at the sight of the owl-themed inn materializing through the rain. She ached from her fingertips to her toes, everything rubbed raw or throbbing in pain. Even Sunu's head hung low.

"Almost there, girl," she murmured, nudging the mare forward.

Flashbacks assailed her as she saw the well out front and the creek behind it. Had it only been two weeks since they'd been here? She felt like a lifetime had happened since then.

She left Sunu with the stableboy, patting the mare's neck affectionately. Wincing at the rumbling noise from inside the inn, she trudged to the front door.

Raucous singing and boot-stomping exploded as she pushed open the inn's door. The innkeeper's eyes narrowed, taking in her bedraggled state.

So she was dripping on the floor. Get over it.

"We're full up," he said, gesturing to the packed tavern. Soldiers crowded every corner, in various states of inebriation—laughing, eating and swigging from huge tankards. Even the owls hanging from the ceiling shimmied in the cacophony.

Oh please, let her have misheard him.

"Are you certain?" Her head pounded in time with the off key singing, her ears ringing as the roar bounced against the walls.

“Quite sure, miss.” His dismissive tone cut deep.

She couldn’t face the rain again, not with darkness falling. Her shoulders, already aching from holding the reins, slumped forward. This was payback for kicking the prince of Dracia out of his room last time. Kallessa keenly remembered his resigned face when he realized he wasn’t sleeping in a soft bed that night. Now she knew exactly how he felt.

As the tavern keeper continued to watch her, his expression softened slightly. “You can stay in the tavern for three coppers. That includes a hot meal.”

Her legs wobbled with relief. Oh, a hot meal. At this point, she would happily curl up on the floor as long as she didn’t have to go back out in that awful weather.

“Is there a place I can change my clothes?”

The innkeeper yelled to the serving girl. “Carly, come here!”

A tall girl with golden braids hurried over. Her plain cotton skirts swung about her ankles as she moved, and the worn leather serving apron tied around her waist stained with splashes of ale and wine.

“What is it, Da?”

“Show her where to change and find her a table,” he instructed.

Before Carly could lead her away, the innkeeper cleared his throat and held out his hand. Oh yes, the three coppers. Kallessa would have next to nothing left after this, but tomorrow she would be home. She could make it. Tomorrow she’d sleep in her own bed by the seashore and let the waves crashing on the beach lull her to sleep.

Carly led her to a cramped but blessedly dry storage room. Kallessa changed quickly, praying her stockings matched in the dim light.

Carly waved her over to a small table at the back of the tavern, far from the roaring fireplace and rowdy crowd. However, reaching it meant navigating through the tavern packed with tipsy men singing off key. Steeling herself, Kallessa lowered her head and attempted to barrel through. Halfway through, a meaty hand seized her waist.

“Where ya going, pretty girl?” A deep voice slurred. The man reeked of alcohol and body odor, and his fingers dug painfully into her ribs.

“Let me go,” she demanded, but instead her voice came out as a tired squeak.

The man yanked her against his chest. She landed roughly on his lap, struggling to regain her footing.

“Aw, don’t be like that, sweetheart,” he laughed, the rumble vibrating against her back. Suddenly, he jerked forward with a pained yelp as a broom handle came crashing down on his head.

“Let her go, Marshall,” Carly growled at the soldier.

Marshall scowled, rubbing his head. “Can’t a man have some fun around here?”

Carly yanked Kallessa out of his lap. “Sorry about that,” she said with an apologetic grimace. “The weather has us all cooped up in here. The boys get restless.”

“Are they all here for the night?” Kallessa asked. *Please say no.*

“Afraid so.”

Kallessa groaned inwardly. No rest tonight either. Her head spun as Carly led her to the table, giving the stink-eye to any man who looked their way.

“I’ll have your food out in a few minutes.” She waved back to the men. “Don’t worry about them. They’ll all pass out in a few hours.”

Kallessa sank down in the smooth wooden chair, finally sitting on something flat that didn’t move. Even her tailbone hurt.

Carly returned quickly with two heavily buttered biscuits, mashed turnips, and two small chicken legs.

“Sorry, they ate all the venison and potatoes.” She set down a tankard beside the meal. “Cider, just pressed yesterday.”

“Thank you so much,” Kallessa said, her voice breaking. “And thanks for earlier.” She waved toward the men.

Carly paused, studying her. “You look like a wrung out dishrag.”

A weak laugh escaped Kallessa’s lips. “I feel like one too.”

“Just eat. I’ll check back later,” Carly promised, then hurried off.

She barely tasted the hearty meal, only the soothing heat as it calmed her aching stomach and sore throat. Once she’d devoured every last morsel, a grogginess crashed over her so strongly that the raucous yelling, off-key singing, and thunderous stomping of boots faded into an indistinct, fuzzy background noise. Even the rough-hewn wooden table before her blurred and wavered as her eyelids grew impossibly heavy.

A firm hand gripped her arm just as her eyelids fluttered closed, the sudden jolt jerking her back to reluctant alertness. Kallessa blinked owlishly, struggling to focus on the concerned face swimming before her bleary gaze.

Carly stood there, shaking her head. “This won’t do.” She pursed her lips, looking across the tavern, and Kallessa followed her gaze. Her eyes ached. They felt scratchy as she looked about the room, trying to care about what was going on, but it had all just turned into noise and flickering light.

Carly picked up her bag and pulled Kallessa up from the hard seat.

“Come with me,” she said, and not waiting for a response, dragged Kallessa through the tavern and up a narrow stairwell at the back of the inn.

She should care where this girl was taking her, but she just couldn’t. The heavy food, the awful, wet day, the week prior, before everything had gone wrong, was all catching up with her at once.

They stopped at a small door, and Carly produced a key. The room walls slanted down from the vaulted ceiling, but all Kallessa could see was the bed. Carly pulled back the blankets.

“Sleep for a few hours. I’ll be back later.”

Gratitude overwhelmed Kallessa, but all she could manage was a feeble nod. She yanked off her boots and collapsed onto the mattress, sighing as Carly pulled the warm blankets up to her neck, cocooning her in their comforting embrace.

As oblivion claimed her, Kallessa’s last thought was of home, and the ache of all she’d left behind.

Thirty-Four

NEVANDER'S BOOTS ECHOED THROUGH the hallway outside Castien's suite, each click a sharp reminder of his helplessness. The healer had been in there for hours, her stern words still ringing in his ears: "The prince needs peace, not someone scowling at his unconscious form."

He clenched his jaw, glaring at the two sentries guarding the door. They straightened under his gaze, eyes snapping forward. If only Shaydn were here. The royal Dracian healer knew more about the healing arts in her beautiful little pinky than this woman would ever accumulate in her lifetime. Nevander pushed his fingers through his hair, the strands falling haphazardly back across his brow.

The door suddenly swung open, startling them all. The silver-haired healer emerged, disapproval dripping from her words. "He's asking for you, my lord."

A surge of sympathy shot through him. If this is what Castien had to put up with after Shaydn left, no wonder he habitually hid from the healer.

Nevander pushed past her, still feeling her sour stare at his back. Castien's voice, weak but defiant, reached him before he saw his friend. "Alone, damn you. Get out of my room."

With a huff, the healer slammed the door shut behind her as Nevander rushed to the bedside. Castien struggled to sit up, his face contorted in pain.

"Ow," Castien flinched, rubbing his battered elbow. "Is she gone?"

"Appears so," Nevander replied, raising an eyebrow.

Castien flopped back onto the pillows, letting out a long exhale. “Ugh, thank the Axan moon. That crabby old wench and her smelling salts could raise even the most unwilling from the dead, if it meant escaping her.”

For a moment, Castien’s pale eyes unfocused. “I remember... a beautiful girl tending to me when I was sick. I miss her.” He shook his head, blinking rapidly as reality crashed back.

“Mother!” His eyes widened in panic. “That bastard, where is he?” Castien struggled to rise from the bed. He glared at Nevander. “Don’t just stand there, help me up!”

Nevander grasped Castien’s arm and hauled him upright. Castien’s eyes rolled back in his head and Nevander caught him before he fell.

“Just-” Castien gasped, “just give me a minute here.”

He gripped Nevander’s arm weakly. “Van, one of the kitchen workers attacked us,” Castien growled, his voice barely above a whisper. “I couldn’t fight him off in this weak, useless body!”

Nevander’s stomach twisted with guilt. He should have been there to protect them.

“The queen is missing,” Nevander said, his voice tight.

Castien’s anguished moan pierced the air. “Mother,” he whispered. Then his eyes snapped open, sharp with urgency. “Is anyone else missing?”

Kallessa was missing.

Nevander clenched his jaw, forcing himself to breathe evenly. He had to let her go on with her life, if that’s what she truly wanted. She and Dovina would be fine. They had to be.

“Not that we know of.”

Castien looked around the dimly lit room. “What time is it?”

Nevander glanced out the window. It had been dark for hours. “Probably around midnight.”

Castien’s jaw dropped, his eyes widening before he snapped his mouth shut again. “Midnight? How long have I been out?”

“We found you this morning, unconscious on the floor.”

“This morning...” Castien whispered, running a hand through his tangled locks.

“When did he attack you?” Nevander pressed.

Castien clenched his fists, his knuckles whitening. “Yesterday evening.” His voice hardened. “That means he has over a day’s lead on us.”

“Your father is on his way here.”

Castien inhaled, casting his gaze toward the windows. “Help me out of this bed, and go slower this time. I need to be on my feet when he gets here.”

Nevander slowly pulled Castien into a sitting position, watching him closely.

“This is all my fault,” Castien grumbled. “I should have reviewed the staff closer. Should have stopped mother from throwing this ridiculous festival.” He raked a hand through his disheveled raven locks, his eyes flickering with frustration.

Nevander met his gaze. “And I was supposed to help you. Instead, I was hiding and pretending to be engaged.”

“Where is she?” Castien asked.

Nevander clenched his jaw, unable to hold Castien’s intense stare. He looked away, his gaze falling on Castien’s desk. “Where are your books that are usually stacked on that desk?”

Castien glanced toward his desk, his eyes narrowing as he registered the empty surface. “I don’t know and don’t change the subject. Where is she?”

Nevander responded flatly. “Gone.”

Castien’s expression darkened. “I thought you said no one else was missing.”

“She’s not missing,” Nevander clarified, frustration boiling up inside him. “She and Dovina left.”

“And why is that?” Castien demanded.

“Because the game of pretend came to an end, dear prince,” Nevander snapped. “Ciana told her who I was, and I guess she didn’t want to be seen with a warmongering whore chaser.”

Castien studied Nevander’s face, his brow furrowed. “She really didn’t know... And she just ran?”

Nevander jaw clenched, and he turned to pace the room, too irritated to stand still any longer. “They are both gone, as is the carriage.”

“That’s just not what I expected.” Castien mumbled.

Nevander paused in his pacing to glare at Castien. “Stop meddling in other people’s lives.”

Castien’s eyes narrowed and he flung his pale arm toward the door. “Go get my valet if all you’re going to be is an ungrateful friend.”

Before Nevander could respond, a woman’s scream pierced the air, sending chills down his spine.

“Where is my cousin? Kallessa! Unhand me, you beast. Kallessa!”

That was Dovina.

Wait, if that was Dovina —

Where was Kallessa?

Dovina’s shrill voice pierced the air. “Kallessa! Kallessa, where are you?”

Nevander’s jaw clenched as he rounded the corner, his boots clicking sharply on the polished floor. The sight that greeted him was almost comical. Dovina, usually the picture of poise, looked like she’d been dragged through a hedge backwards. Her blonde curls formed a wild halo around her flushed face, and her clothes were hopelessly rumpled. A palace guard held her firmly by the arm as she struggled.

“It’s fine, soldier. Release her,” Nevander commanded, his voice tight with barely contained frustration.

As the guard obeyed, Dovina’s eyes locked onto Nevander. Her rosebud mouth dropped open, her eyes widening, before she sank into a deep, formal curtsy.

“My lord, Prince Nevander,” she breathed, her voice suddenly calm and reverent.

Nevander’s stomach twisted. Of course, she hadn’t recognized her prince with his wild hair and beard. He briefly considered letting her hold that perfect pose until she toppled over, but the gnawing worry about Kallessa’s whereabouts overrode his pettiness.

“Lady Dovina,” he returned the greeting, his court voice dripping with authority. “You can drop the act. I know who you are.”

Confusion flashed across her face. “My lord?”

“Come with me.” He grasped her arm, steering her towards the nearest parlor–ironically, the same one where Ciana had revealed his identity to Kallessa.

Once seated, Nevander leaned forward, fixing Dovina with a steely gaze. “Kallessa is not with you?”

Dovina’s brow furrowed. “No, my lord. Why would she be?”

A chill raced up Nevander's spine. "Because she disappeared the same time you did."

Her eyes darted around the room. "But that doesn't make sense. Why would she leave? How would she leave? I took the carriage." She paused. "How do you know my cousin?"

Nevander's patience wore thin. "Remember the inn with the owl-obsessed owner? The 'vagabond' you kicked out of his room?"

He watched comprehension slowly light up her face, followed quickly by horror. Dovina fell to her knees, head bowed low. "My lord, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. Please forgive me."

"I have imprisoned people for less." Which was a lie. But he needed to instill some fear into the flighty girl so she would listen. "Get up and tell me exactly what happened since you left. Leave anything out, and I'll have you thrashed."

As Dovina slid back into her chair, another spark of realization ignited in her eyes. "Wait, wait, *you* are Kallessa's Nevander?" she blurted out.

He gave a curt nod in response, his expression hardening. "I'm asking the questions here. Start talking."

Dovina bit her lip, her gaze dropping to her lap. "I wanted to pick out my own husband."

Nevander's eyebrows raised, but kept silent, praying she would quickly get to the point.

She ran her fingers across her wrinkled skirts. "Warwick was so sweet to me and attentive and had all the same opinions about everything as I did." She flicked her eyes to Nevander's, pleading for him to understand with her gaze. "We even have the same shade of blue eyes! And he's so handsome and young, even though he'd been married before. And he was a Krithadean dignitary."

Warwick? Nevander slowly breathed in and out through his nose.

"When he proposed to me, I was so excited. That would teach Father to try to sell me to the neighbor."

She tried to continue her tale, but Nevander raised his hand, cutting her off. "Sell you to the neighbor?" he repeated.

Her lips trembled. Oh, she was good. He knew her and even felt himself soften at her vulnerability. "I overheard him telling Mother that if he offered me to the widow on the neighboring estate, they could double their holdings." She sniffed. "He has four children and he's bald!"

Dovina wiped her eyes. “Anyway, when Warwick proposed, it sounded so romantic and adventurous at first. We planned to run away and elope, then have a formal wedding ceremony later.” She took a shaky breath. “So we took the carriage and headed toward the Krithadean capital.”

She twisted her hands together. “But when we arrived, we ran into some of Warwick’s old friends. He went out drinking with them, leaving me alone in our room at the inn.” Resentment crept into her voice. “I sat downstairs in the common area and overheard the innkeeper gossiping. Warwick’s in debt from gambling, looking for a rich wife to pay it off.”

She gasped. “And... they say he murdered his first wife! I realized what a mistake I’d made and escaped that evening with the carriage. Teansong is too far to travel from the Krithadean capital and I knew Kallessa would still be here and likely be worried because I forgot to leave a note. So I came back here.” She at least had the decency to look slightly guilty about that oversight.

“Father is going to be so angry with me,” Dovina said, fidgeting with the lace on her sleeve.

Nevander sat back, studying her. “Why?”

Dovina hesitated, chewing on her lower lip nervously. “Well, he sort of doesn’t know where I am.”

He clenched his jaw, a muscle twitching in his cheek as he fought to keep his expression neutral. “What do you mean?”

She pouted. “I got the post the day the invitation came to the Axan Moon Festival. After what I’d overheard, I had to escape. So I had a wardrobe made for Kallessa and,” she quickly finished the sentence in a voice so low, Nevander almost missed it, “I may have threatened her into coming with me.”

His nostrils flared and he took a deep breath. Didn’t Kallessa have enough to deal with? “How did you threaten her?”

Dovina glanced out the window, her brow furrowed. “I don’t know why, but Father has always harbored an inexplicable hatred for Kallessa,” she admitted hesitantly. “So, I told her he would cut off her stipend if she didn’t come with me.” She opened her hands in a pleading gesture. “It was a lie, but the truth is, he could indeed cut her off at any moment.”

Rage boiled in Nevander’s chest. “You used her as a means to an end?”

Dovina squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze. “She needed to get away too,” she protested weakly. “Being cooped up in crazy Aunt Gevene’s

cottage all the time can't be good for her. And I thought maybe she might meet someone here, too…"

"But now she's gone," Nevander said flatly, fighting the urge to race to the stables and charge after her. Kallessa had left for home, alone.

Oblivious to Nevander's building anger, Dovina asked, "Why would she leave? She seemed so happy."

She had seemed that way the last time Nevander had seen her. Wrapped in his cloak, with snowflakes in her hair. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He jumped up, pacing the room.

Then he began firing off questions at Dovina, who still sat huddled in the chair, her arms wrapped tightly around waist. "Did she know of this harebrained idea of yours to run away?"

"No," Dovina whispered.

"So no one, save Kallessa, knows where you are?"

In an even smaller voice, she answered again. "No."

Nevander's fists clenched at his sides. "You stupid, foolish girl."

Dovina began to cry in earnest then, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

Ciana, of course, chose that moment to enter, her brow furrowed with concern. "What is going on here?"

Dovina, with her big glossy eyes brimming with tears, looked up at her princess. She stumbled into an awkward curtsy, her shoulders shaking as she cried even harder, the sobs wracking her slight frame.

As Nevander quickly recounted the events, Ciana's face grew graver. A heavy silence fell once he finished.

"I just d-don't want to marry the neighbor!" Dovina blubbered.

"Oh, for Axan's sake," Nevander muttered, exasperated.

Ciana sat next to Dovina, putting her arms around the distraught girl. "We won't let your father marry you off without your consent," she soothed, "but we need to find Kallessa."

Dovina quieted as she processed Ciana's words. "If she thought I left, she probably thinks I went home. But why did she leave?"

Ciana met Nevander's gaze. "Because she found out the man she fell in love with was the prince of Dracia."

Realization dawned in Dovina's eyes. "She would be ruined. If anyone knew, no one would ever marry her after this."

Nevander's stomach lurched. Was his reputation truly that bad?

“Of course she didn’t know,” Dovina continued, oblivious. “The poor little country bumpkin didn’t even recognize her own prince.”

Nevander raised an eyebrow. Neither had Dovina, initially.

She waved a hand dismissively. “Well, you’re easy to recognize now. Who could ever mistake that profile?”

Did she mean the profile that was on the Dracian half crown?

Nevander’s heart thumped in an uneasy rhythm as a realization hit him. “What do you think your father is doing right now?” he asked, his voice a practice in control.

The smirk vanished from Dovina’s face. “What do you mean?”

“His precious daughter has been missing for almost two weeks. Do you think he’s sitting around waiting patiently for your return?”

Her face froze. “He’ll have soldiers out looking for me.”

“And don’t you think the first place he will look is your aunt’s house?”

Dovina swallowed hard. “Aunt Gevene would tell Father anything he wanted to know.”

“Including the fact that you and Kallessa left together almost two weeks ago?”

She slowly nodded.

“So what will happen when Kallessa shows back up without you?”

Dovina gasped, her hand flying to her mouth as the full gravity of the situation sank in. “Oh, no.”

Thirty-Five

KALLESSA JERKED AWAKE, HER heart hammering against her ribs. Unfamiliar shadows loomed in the darkness, and for a moment, panic seized her. Then reality crashed back—the inn, the drunken soldiers, Carly's kindness. Dawn's fingers were just beginning to stretch across the sky.

The door creaked open. Carly's tall silhouette slipped inside, a bag slung over her shoulder. She perched on the edge of the bed, her weight dipping the mattress.

"Thank you," Kallessa croaked, wincing as the words scraped her raw throat. Every muscle in her body screamed with exhaustion.

"Everyone is asleep downstairs, but I don't think it's safe for you to remain here," Carly whispered urgently. "Dawn is less than an hour away. If you leave now, you can get ahead of them."

Kallessa's head throbbed, a dull pounding behind her eyes. "Ahead of who?"

In the near darkness, Kallessa couldn't see Carly's expression, but the grave tone of her voice sent a shiver of trepidation down her spine.

"Soldiers are looking for someone who fits your description. I don't want to know why. I just want you to leave before there's any trouble."

Soldiers? It must be a mistake. "But, I didn't do anything. I'm just trying to get home." A thought struck her. "Has a young blond lady in a Wynlar coach stopped here?"

"Not that I know of." Carly stood up, leaving the bag behind. "There's food inside. I have to start breakfast. Don't be here when I return."

The door closed behind Carly with a thud. Why were soldiers searching for her? Where was Dovina? What if she hadn't returned home? Kallessa shook her head. No, that was silly. Of course she did. She probably just stayed at another inn. They would laugh about this in a few weeks. Or years.

Kallessa forced her aching body into motion. She left one of her remaining copper coins for Carly, laced her boots, and gathered her things. The hallway floorboards creaked ominously as she crept down the stairs. Snores and the stench of stale beer assaulted her senses.

Outside, the crisp air felt wonderful on her feverish skin. Pearly silver kissed the eastern horizon, and only a few clouds drifted across the sky. Oh, thank goodness, the rain had stopped! She was only hours from home, and for the first time on her trip, she felt relief in sight.

She saddled Sunu with the help of a sleepy stable boy and rode out to the sounds of rustling leaves and a lone wood thrush singing from somewhere above her.

After leaving the sight of the inn, she looked through the bag Carly had given her. A jug of cider sat beside two wedges of cheese, a pear, and two biscuits. It would do. She wasn't even hungry. Only her throat felt like it had been scraped with a whetstone. She drank some of the cider, and it soothed her throat, but did little for the throbbing behind her temples. She just wanted to get home and honestly sleep for a week.

She let Sunu take her time as the sky grew lighter and color came back into the landscape. They couldn't be more than six or seven hours from Teansong. She drowsed in the saddle as the sun began to twinkle through the trees, listening to the rest of nature awaken.

By mid afternoon, the familiar landmarks of Teansong appeared. She was so close to home, yet her last night with Nevander kept intruding on her thoughts. That kiss in the greenhouse haunted her, his strong hands on her waist, the intoxicating warmth of his lips. It had felt so real, so perfect.

The lyrics he'd whispered to her floated through her mind.

There were two lovers
Gone to sea
The Ederon sea
Shall separate thee

There were two lovers

Who sank to the bottom
Of the bottomless
Ederon sea

What if she had sailed off with Nevander, two lovers bound by their love of the sea? But fairy tales weren't meant for girls like her. Tynan had used her, and now a prince had played her for a fool.

The small thatched cottage by the sea—her refuge for five long years—came into view. The crash of waves and cries of gulls that filled the air were usually a comfort to her. Today, it only intensified her loneliness.

Tears blurred Kallessa's vision as she approached the cottage.

Home at last. But she'd had never felt so lost.

Thirty-Six

NEVANDER'S MIND RACED, PANIC clawing at his chest. Kallessa was out there alone, heading straight into a snake pit. What if she was attacked on the road? Or at an inn? Could she even take care of herself?

He glanced at Ciana, still comforting the sniffling Dovina. His sister had endured a loveless marriage that left her and Wynna scarred. Of course, she'd want to protect others from that fate. Even if it meant defending this ridiculous, self-centered girl who'd put Kallessa in danger.

Nevander huffed, resuming his pacing.

"I believe that part of the carpet has had enough," a weak voice rasped from the doorway. Castien leaned heavily against the frame, pale and bruised. His left eye was nearly swollen shut, a stark purple against his ashen face. He wore a navy blue tunic and trousers, his dark hair combed back, but he had discarded the coat and woolen cap.

Nevander stopped abruptly. "Oh, so now the entire group is here, the party can start."

Dovina gasped, hastily wiping her eyes. She sat up straighter, her face a mask of shock and embarrassment. If Nevander had known Castien's presence would shut her up so effectively, he would have dragged him into the parlor half an hour ago.

Castien limped in and collapsed heavily onto the couch. Moments later, a maid entered, her arms laden down with a large tray bearing an assortment of cut fruit, various cheeses, and savory scones still warm from the oven.

She was followed closely by another maid carrying a steaming teapot and a set of delicate porcelain cups.

As they withdrew, Castien grabbed a scone, stuffing it into his mouth. “Now the party can start,” he mumbled, crumbs falling to the carpet. He poured himself a cup of steaming tea and splashed cream into it before gulping it down behind the scone. Then he piled a small plate with cheeses and biscuits.

Nevander stared, shocked. Castien had eaten more in this sitting than the entire time he’d been at Ravenbluff.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Castien demanded between bites.

Dovina, her cheeks now dry, opened her mouth to speak.

“Not you.” Castien pointed at her with a wedge of cheese. “Ciana, you are usually the most logical. Explain.”

As Ciana recounted the events, Nevander’s stomach churned. How could he have let Kallessa go?

Castien pointed at Nevander. “You’re an idiot. I can’t believe you let Kallessa go without a fight.”

Nevander caught Ciana nodding and rounded on her. “You told me to forget her!”

“Since when do you listen to me?” Ciana quipped back. Dovina had gone silent, her eyes darting back and forth between them.

“And you,” Nevander stared pointedly at Castien, “were beaten into unconsciousness. Remember that part?”

“Quiet,” Castien hissed. “I’m the highest rank here now. Nevander, you and Dovina will go after Kallessa. Ciana, stay and help me keep Father from doing anything rash. It’s two hours until sunrise. I will have everything ready for you to travel in an hour. Nevander, go get some breakfast and coffee. Dovina, go get yourself cleaned up. You look like a wreck.”

Nevander’s jaw clenched. He’d been planning to go after Kallessa anyway, prince’s orders or not. The thought of her out there alone, frightened and vulnerable, made his chest ache.

As he reached the threshold, Castien called back to him.

“Van, send Declan this way and find me another maid. I need more food.”

Nevander shook his head and fled the room.

An hour later, Nevander stood in the stables, checking the straps on Malecore, Castien’s ill-tempered stallion. The beast nipped his arm, and

Nevander popped its head lightly. “Knock it off.”

Dovina’s whining drifted from the next stall. “I can’t ride straight saddle. It will ruin my skirts.”

“It’s the prince’s orders, my lady,” the stable boy replied firmly.

Nevander led Malecore out, the horse’s hooves clopping loudly on the stone floor, passing Dovina and her gentler mount. Four soldiers waited outside.

“I don’t know why we can’t take the carriage,” Dovina pouted.

Nevander’s jaw clenched. How could anyone be so selfish? He took a deep breath. “We don’t have time. The horses are faster.”

The blush of dawn painted the horizon as they set out. An owl’s hoot transported Nevander back to his first sight of Kallessa–pale with motion sickness, yet the loveliest woman he’d ever seen.

Where was she now?

They rode in silence for two hours before Nevander finally acknowledged Dovina’s pleading looks and stopped at a brook. Dovina dismounted with a groan. “I hate riding horseback. I don’t understand why Kallessa always enjoyed it so much.”

Dovina was everything that Kallessa was not, and it grated on his nerves. “What is your father like?”

Dovina was silent for a long time. “May I please ask you a question first?”

That was probably the most polite thing she’d ever said to him. Nevander nodded.

She brushed her blond curls from her eyes. “Are you a just prince? I-I don’t know much about you, even though I read everything about the king and queen and the crown prince. But I know next to nothing about Prince Nevander.”

He didn’t want to share himself with this girl, but he answered her nonetheless. “I am just.” He’d been just on the battlefield, holding only onto his integrity when all else had crumbled around him.

Dovina nodded solemnly. “Then maybe you will understand. My father is just.” She paused, then asked, “Are you kind? As a ruler, I mean.”

Nevander considered. He strived to take others’ perspectives into account, never seeking to harm for selfish gain. “I am kind,” he affirmed.

Dovina stared down the winding road, her expression unreadable. After a heavy pause, she spoke, her voice laced with a bitterness that seemed ill-

fitting for one so young. “My father is not.”

Thirty-Seven

KALLESSA'S VISION BLURRED AS she entered Aunt Gevene's yard, her body screaming with exhaustion. The cottage stood silent, shutters closed tight against the afternoon sun. This was wrong.

That wasn't like Gevene at all. She loved the ocean breezes, loved the sunshine and the way it dappled through the windows, casting ever-changing patterns on the worn wooden floors. Her heart hammered as she circled to the back garden. The barn and chicken coop lay empty, devoid of their usual bustling life. The eerie stillness sent chills down her spine.

Kallessa's hands trembled as she pushed open the cottage door. The familiar creak of hinges echoed through the empty rooms. Dust motes danced in the shafts of sunlight streaming through the cracks in the shutters.

"Aunt Gevene?" she called, her voice barely above a whisper.

Silence answered her.

On the kitchen table, a folded piece of paper caught her eye. Kallessa's heart raced as she unfolded the note, recognizing her aunt's scrawling script.

My dearest Kallessa,

I hope this letter finds you well. I've reunited with an old flame. Can you believe it? We've married and are honeymooning in Vaston. Don't worry about me, sweetheart. I'll send another letter soon. Know that I love you very much.

Aunt Gevene

Tears welled in Kallessa's eyes as she read the words and she shook her head. She left her aunt alone for two weeks, and she ran off with an old beau? This was exactly the type of thing Gevene would do. But she deserved happiness just as much as anyone else, didn't she?

It didn't stop that sense of abandonment digging even deeper into her, though.

Wiping her eyes, Kallessa stepped back outside. The sun's warmth felt hollow against her skin. She approached Sunu, who nickered softly in greeting. As she mounted the mare, her mind turned to Dovina. Had her cousin made it back safely?

Just as she was about to urge Sunu forward, hoofbeats thundered behind her.

Kallessa wheeled Sunu around, her breath catching as five armed soldiers and a thin man in black bore down on her. Kallessa froze, dread sinking into the pit of her stomach like a leaden weight. She recognized the close cropped silver hair, the piercing blue eyes narrowed in determination. Uncle Talos.

He reined his black stallion to a halt, his eyes blazing with unprecedented fury. "Surround her," he barked.

The soldiers closed in, swords drawn. One seized Sunu's reins, causing the mare to sidestep nervously into Talos' massive black stallion.

In a blur of movement, iron fingers clamped around Kallessa's cloak. She was ripped from the saddle and slammed to the ground. Pain exploded through her body as her head bounced sickeningly off the wet dirt, mud splattering across her face. She lay gasping, vision swimming.

Polished black boots appeared in her line of sight. A rough hand yanked her up and flipped her onto her back with disdainful ease.

Talos loomed over her, face contorted in a menacing snarl. "Where is my daughter?" The words hung in the air, suffocating her with their weight. Kallessa's mind whirled, but she could only stare back at the man before her, paralyzed by the inferno of fury burning in his eyes.

"Where is she?" he roared, the bellow echoing through the garden as he drew back his black-gloved fist.

Kallessa flinched, holding up trembling hands. "Wait, please, Uncle," she whispered.

"Uncle?" Talos spat, his chest heaving with each breath. "Don't you ever call me that, you little-" He abruptly cut himself off, nostrils flaring.

Kallessa's mind raced. "I thought Dovina would have made it back by now," she stammered.

"Back from where?" Talos demanded through gritted teeth.

Then the truth crashed over her. Dovina had never told her father about the Axan Moon Festival. That explained why there'd been no reservations at the inn, why her cousin had been in such an uncharacteristic hurry, even refusing to take her maid. Oh Dovina, what have you done?

"The Axan Moon Festival?" Kallessa ventured, bracing herself.

"The what?" Talos's face turned crimson, veins bulging. "Tell me where she is right this instant!"

Kallessa flinched, her head pounding as waves of panic washed over her. Her throat burned so badly she thought she might be sick. "I don't know."

Talos seized her collar, cutting off her air. "This was all your idea, wasn't it? Did you talk my daughter into this?" His grip tightened. "I always knew you were nothing but trash. I warned my brother to stay away from that savage Reykian mother of yours. And look where it got him!"

He shoved her back into the mud. Kallessa gasped, pain lancing through her. But the physical hurt paled compared to the ache in her heart. Her mother, savage? The kindest soul she'd ever known? Tears stung her eyes as memories of warm embraces and gentle lullabies flooded her mind.

Talos spat on the ground beside her head, his saliva landing mere inches from Kallessa's face. "Guards, take her to the prison. Maybe she will remember where my daughter is when the rats start nibbling on her toes. She'll learn what it means to defy a Wynlar."

He swung onto his stallion and rode off, leaving Kallessa at the guards' mercy. Rough hands bound her wrists and ankles with coarse rope. They hoisted her and threw her over a horse like a sack of grain. The jarring impact and humiliation were more than Kallessa could bear. Her head spun and darkness crept into her vision, silencing everything.

It was dark. Kallessa didn't know if it was dark because night had fallen, or because wherever she was had no windows. A sickly gray light crept under the door, dimly outlining the stone floor where she lay. Her body ached in

ways she didn't know it could, every muscle screaming in protest with even the slightest movement. Swallowing was agony, bringing tears to her eyes as her parched throat constricted. Her head swam with throbbing pain every time she turned her neck.

She still had on her boots, but when she curled her toes inside of them, she couldn't feel them. Dried flakes of mud fell to the floor as she rubbed across her aching face, caking in the cuts and scrapes that marred her skin.

The rattling of her own teeth had jolted her awake. One moment, icy shivers wracked her frame, the next, sweat drenched her skin. How long had she been here? Her thoughts jumbled incoherently, everything hazy and out of focus.

Kallessa pushed herself up with trembling arms, her fingers aching and stiff from the chill. She leaned back against the rough stone wall, wrapping her damp cloak tighter. The wall seemed to leech warmth from her bones.

Nausea rolled through her and she gasped, leaning forward as dry heaves wracked her body. Bile burned her throat like acid, and she convulsively swallowed against the pain.

She slumped back, wiping her mouth. The only sound she heard was her own harsh breath. In the dim light, she made out the cramped, bare cell. A rusted bucket sat in one shadowed corner, while the others held misshapen piles of... something. She wrestled with her tangled thoughts. The last clear memory was of Aunt Gevene's cottage, then Uncle Talos descending upon her like a demon. Everything after blurred, but his words still echoed.

I always knew you were nothing but trash.

Talos had judged her solely on her heritage. But hadn't she done the same to Nevander? She'd fled Ravenbluff Estate in a blind panic, letting secondhand news of his identity guide her actions.

If she ever had the chance to see him again-no, she couldn't delude herself with such thoughts. Their paths would never cross again. If only she'd taken a moment to ask for an explanation rather than running.

Pulling her aching limbs in close, she closed her eyes. She was so tired.

A loud groan of metal startled her awake. Piercing lantern light flooded the cell as two shadows moved behind it. The lantern thrust into her face, revealing Talos's harsh features, his eyes faded to an eerie white.

"Ready to talk?" he demanded. "Tell me where Dovina is, and I'll let you go. Though you don't deserve such mercy." His lips curled into a cruel smirk.

Kallessa's heart raced. Where *was* Dovina? She racked her brain, coming up empty. When she tried to speak, only a feeble croak escaped her constricted throat. She felt utterly powerless, trapped in this nightmare, with no escape.

Was Talos's face... changing? His features seemed to elongate, nostrils flaring until he resembled a snarling beast. Kallessa gasped and jerked back instinctively, a ragged scream caught in her throat. Stars exploded across her vision as her head slammed against the stone wall.

"What's wrong with her?" A voice echoed as if from far away.

"Don't know, but I don't want to catch it if it's contagious," another unfamiliar voice responded, the lantern light wavering.

"She's useless. Leave her. I'll find my daughter myself."

The door slammed shut with a deafening metallic thud, leaving Kallessa alone in suffocating blackness once more.

Phantom images danced across her vision. She had to escape. Kallessa stumbled to her feet, but her legs buckled. She crashed to her knees with a pained cry, banging them against the unforgiving stone. For a disorienting moment, she couldn't recall what she'd been trying to do.

Curling into a protective ball, a wave of desolation washed over her. Through everything, Kallessa had always clung to hope that her circumstances would improve. That somehow, a glimmer of light would pierce the suffocating darkness that had enveloped her since the carriage accident stole her family.

But as she lay trembling in the icy chill, that hope crumbled. Her parents were gone. Her brother was gone. Aunt Gevene hadn't come for her, neither had Dovina.

And Nevander, the one soul who had awakened a spark within her, had vanished like a fleeting dream.

Nevander's eyes burned with fatigue as he guided his horse along the darkening road. The rhythmic clip-clop of hooves had long since faded into white noise, broken only by Dovina's occasional sighs.

“I’m sorry about how I treated you when we first met,” Dovina said. She stifled a yawn, her hand resting casually on her saddle’s pommel.

Nevander’s lips quirked. “Are you only sorry because you found out I was a prince?”

Dovina raised her perfectly arched eyebrows. “Does it make me a bad person if I say yes?”

A tired chuckle escaped him. At least she was honest.

The day stretched endlessly, each hour weighing heavier than the last. Two hours of sleep weren’t nearly enough to process everything that had happened. Exhaustion clouded his thoughts, and he found himself nodding off in the saddle.

“You’re falling asleep, my lord,” Dovina chirped.

Nevander jerked awake, blinking rapidly. This wouldn’t do. As much as he wanted to push on, he’d be useless if he didn’t rest.

The inn’s tavern buzzed with low conversation as they settled in for a late supper. He’d insisted on separate rooms, unable to stomach the thought of sharing quarters with Dovina. And she certainly wouldn’t have stood for it either. He was sure, in her mind, it was bad enough traveling alone with him. But there was nothing to be done for it. If not for her stupid life choices, they wouldn’t even be in this situation. The Krithadean guards that rode with them had camped out in the field behind the inn.

A group of Dracian soldiers entered, their armor clanking as they took the booth across from them. At first, they kept to themselves, but soon their furtive glances and hushed murmurs caught Nevander’s attention.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” Nevander asked.

The burly soldier with a thick mustache nodded. “Pardon us, Captain. Might that be Lady Dovina Wynlar with you?”

Nevander narrowed his eyes. “Do you know who I am?”

The soldier swallowed hard. “Even though we’re border guards, that doesn’t mean we don’t recognize our own sovereign, my lord.”

Nevander flicked his eyes about the dimly lit tavern room. No one else seated at the scattered tables seemed to pay attention to their conversation.

“Where were you stationed during the war?” Nevander asked.

The burly soldier shuddered visibly. “Narian range.” He held up his left hand, missing two fingers. “Lost these to the damn cold.”

Nevander’s jaw clenched, memories of that hellish fight flashing through his mind. He waved down the server, handing her six copper coins. “Serve

these boys whatever they want, on me."

"Much obliged, Captain, but we're on a mission from Lord Wynlar of Teansong," another soldier interjected. "Is that Lady Dovina traveling with you?"

Dovina, who had been silent until now, suddenly piped up. "My father hired you?"

Nevander let out a sigh. So much for subtlety. But at least as a prince, he outranked the petty Lord Wynlar.

"Yes, milady," the soldier confirmed with a respectful nod.

Her pretty face wilted. "Is he very angry with me for leaving?"

The soldier's attempt at a reassuring smile fell flat. "Surely not with you, Lady Dovina."

He turned back to Nevander, the smile dropping. "Captain, I hope you understand that we're ordered to return the lady as soon as she is found. Even if it's the middle of the night."

Nevander nodded. "I'll relinquish the lady, but you must answer some questions first."

"I'll answer what I can, my lord."

"Did Lord Wynlar know where his daughter was?"

"No, my lord."

Nevander's pulse quickened. "Is he holding anyone responsible for her disappearance?"

The soldier leaned back, pursing his lips. "He's holding some poor girl in the Teansong jail. Rumor is that she's his niece. Hell of a way to treat your own blood."

Nevander's grip on the table tightened, a splinter piercing his skin. Pain shot through his hand, but it was nothing compared to the icy dread that gripped his chest. Across from him, Dovina's face drained of color, her fork clattering onto the plate.

"Oh, she will never forgive me for this," Dovina whispered.

"Is that all you're worried about?" He leaned forward, his voice dangerously low. "Your cousin is in a jail cell because of your foolish actions."

Dovina shrank in her seat, but Nevander was already on his feet, his chair scraping harshly against the floor. Fatigue vanished, replaced by a burning determination. The thought of Kallessa alone in a cold, dark cell drove him forward.

He turned to the guards, his voice steady despite the storm raging inside him. “Not only will I release Dovina into your care, I will guide you myself.”

The soldiers bowed their heads, unable to defy their prince.

“It would be an honor, my lord,” one replied.

“Is it really?” Nevander asked.

The guard’s brows drew together. “My lord?”

Nevander’s voice grew harsh, unable to reign in his warring feelings any longer. “Is it really your honor to help the captain who let your brothers in arms die?”

The guard’s jaw dropped.

Nevander had said it. He’d finally voiced the thought that had plagued him for two years. Every time a soldier did his bidding.

Were they really honored? Or only doing as they were told?

Why didn’t they look at him with scorn?

The soldier drew himself upright, staring Nevander straight in the eyes. “It is our right to live and die by the sword as soldiers. You neither gave that honor to us, nor took it away.” He then added with a subtle nod, “My lord.”

Nevander stood stunned, the soldier’s words piercing through his self-loathing. A flicker of hope ignited in his chest, but he quickly tamped it down. There would be time for self-reflection later.

He tightened his jaw and dropped four silver coins into each man’s hand. “For your loyalty. Now, let’s ride. We have a lady to rescue.”

Every time Kallessa swam up from the murky depths of unconsciousness, razor-sharp claws dug at her throat, and a bone-chilling cold permeated every inch of her, burrowing deeper and deeper. The agony was so intense that it felt like a separate, malevolent entity, toying with her, punishing her for reasons she could not fathom. As if her body itself was a cruel, sentient presence, determined to torment her.

No, it was so much better in the dark depths where the pain couldn’t reach her.

Thirty-Eight

THEY RODE OUT OF the inn at eight o'clock that night, flanked by four soldiers. Nevander had dispatched a letter to Ciana, explaining the situation. The soldiers rode ahead, torches blazing, while he took up the rear with Dovina between them.

The girl had been subdued since learning about Kallessa. Fear clouded her eyes - whether of her father or for her cousin, Nevander couldn't tell. Living so far north in Dracia, he'd never paid much attention to the minor lords of the southern provinces. Now, he was about to get intimately acquainted with Lord Wynlar. The thought made his jaw clench.

They rode for hours through the shadowy woods, the silence broken by only by a wolf's mournful howl. Fatigue clawed at Nevander, but he ignored it, willing himself to stay alert.

Dovina began to nod off, nearly falling from her mount. Sighing, Nevander pulled her onto his horse, bracing her with his arms. As she dozed against him, his resolve to dislike her weakened. She was just a young girl, after all. Did he even want to recall all the stupid things he'd done as a teenager? If Castien were here, he would have been happy to list them off, even though he'd been involved with most of them.

King Graynor had probably made it to Ravenbluff Estate by now. Honestly, Nevander was glad not to be there. Castien's father was brutally hard to reason with in a crisis, and with queen Lyra missing, he would be impossible. Thankfully, two of the most level headed people he knew, Castien and Ciana, were left behind to handle things.

He caught a whiff of salty ocean air. They were nearing Teansong, the coastal town where Kallessa had grown up. What had her life been like in those early years, before tragedy struck? The thought of her made his chest tighten.

As they rode into the barrack headquarters, the stars fading from the predawn sky, Nevander wasted no time sending word to Lord Talos Wynlar that his daughter had been found.

He really wanted to rip into this odious man who would dare lock up his own niece, but seeing Kallessa again was his priority. Would she be glad to see him? Could she forgive his deception?

Nevander gripped Dovina's arm gently before leaving her with the soldiers. "Remember who I am," he said, his tone firm yet reassuring.

Dovina swallowed hard and nodded, her expression still laced with worry. Nevander gave her arm a gentle squeeze. "The princess already promised she wouldn't let your father marry you off without your consent, but you need to go home and get things sorted out."

Her eyes filled with grateful tears. "Thank you, my prince. I mean it. And tell Kallessa I'm sorry."

A small smile tugged at Nevander's lips. "You can tell her yourself."

Following another soldier, they stalked toward the jail on the other side of town. The predawn chill seeped into Nevander's bones, rooftops glistening with early frost under the fading moonlight.

The squat stone building loomed before them, its thick wooden door and small barred windows exuding misery. Rage crashed over Nevander again. Kallessa, locked up in this dismal place for trying to help her ungrateful cousin? He clenched his fists and shoved past the soldier, yanking open the heavy door.

Inside, the air was even colder, shadows lurking in every corner. The soldier fumbled with a set of large, rusty keys, his breath clouding the miserable confines. Nevander snatched the lantern from him impatiently, holding it closer to illuminate the stubborn lock.

"Dammit, man! Get it open already," Nevander growled.

The lock finally gave way with a loud crunching click that clanked against the damp stone walls. The soldier shoved the door open, the hinges screeching in protest. Nevander stepped into the shadowy chamber, his eyes quickly scanning the dimly lit space. A dank, musty odor permeated the air,

along with a mixture of vomit and sweat. This place was abhorrent. He wouldn't even subject criminals to these circumstances.

"Kallessa?" he called, his voice echoing dully against the damp stone.

No sound. No movement.

He stepped in further, and the flickering lantern light revealed a motionless form on the floor. Kallessa lay in a filthy heap, like a pile of refuse. He dropped the lantern and stumbled to her before gathering her into his arms. An icy chill shot through him at her deathly coldness. He brushed the tangled strands from her ashen face, his fingers trembling. Her lips were parted slightly, cracked and gray. Each shallow breath seemed a struggle.

"No, no, no…" The words tumbled from his lips as panic gripped him. Her head lolled back like a rag doll, exposing the pallid hollows of her cheeks. If she died... No, he couldn't bear to finish that thought. He had to get her somewhere warm, safe.

Turning on the soldier with a thunderous expression, he barked, "Get a carriage and blankets immediately! I don't care if you have to steal them. This is in the name of the crown. If this young woman dies, I'm holding you personally responsible."

The soldier's face drained of color and he sprinted away. Nevander swiftly wrapped Kallessa in his heavy cloak, desperately trying to warm her. How could a man treat his own kin this way? He stroked her cheek, remembering how it had blushed with pleasure at his touch. Now, there was no response, only the faintest rasp of labored breathing.

A stagecoach came barreling around the corner, the horses' hooves thundering against the cobblestones. A frantic-looking soldier clung to the reins while a disheveled man, one hand clutching his trousers and the other waving wildly, gave chase. The stagecoach ground to a halt before Nevander, the soldier's eyes wide at the sight of Kallessa's still form.

Cradling Kallessa, Nevander jumped into the stagecoach, his heart pounding. His shoulder shot through with pain that he ignored.

The disheveled man yanked the door open, face flushed. "Where do ya think you're going with my coach? I have to deliver the mail tomorrow!"

"I'll have it back by morning," Nevander ground out. "Please, a lady's life hangs in the balance."

He couldn't let her die, not like the others whose faces still haunted his nightmares.

The man's eyes widened as he took in Kallessa's still form. "Godspeed, sir. But please have my coach back by morning." He slammed the door shut, and the carriage lurched forward.

"Where to, my lord?" the soldier shouted over the clatter of hooves.

"Wynlar Estate," Nevander rasped.

Kallessa would live, even if he had to move heaven and earth to make it so. As the carriage raced through the gray dawn, Nevander held her close, willing his warmth into her frigid body.

The sun cracked the horizon, rimming the streets in glittering frost. Nevander's heart pounded as the carriage thundered to a halt before Wynlar Estate, a grand two-story sandstone structure that emerged from the hillside, as if nature itself had willed it into existence. The wide entrance swarmed with frantic activity. Lord Wynlar himself stood rigidly on the steps, his face contorted in a dark scowl, his wool overcoat buttoned up against the chill. He had the frame of a scarecrow, all harsh angles and sharp edges.

Lady Wynlar cowered beside him, clutching a fur cloak tightly to her narrow chest, her expression pinched with fright. Nevander would give them something to be frightened about.

Nevander's voice cracked like a whip as he issued orders to the soldier. "I want every able-bodied sentry here within the hour. Summon the swiftest rider to carry a dispatch to the capital at once. And find me a skilled healer, immediately."

The soldier's crisp bow and swift departure barely registered as Nevander turned his focus to the unconscious woman in his arms.

Pain lanced through his shoulder, threatening to loosen his grip on Kallessa. Gritting his teeth, he clutched her tighter. He inhaled deeply, the dank scent of her matted hair filling his nostrils as he refocused on Lord and Lady Wynlar. They dare stand before him, bundled in their furs while Kallessa had been caged like a beast in a frigid cell for two days?

Anger propelled each step up the dark granite staircase, Kallessa's slight weight growing heavier with every movement. This estate should have been Kallessa's rightful home, her sanctuary.

Lord Wynlar spoke loudly, his nasal voice carrying across the courtyard. “What is the meaning of this? You bring that girl to my house? The one who kidnapped my daughter?”

The blood rushing in Nevander’s ears felt glorious, dulling all pain and fatigue he’d felt only moments ago. How easy it would be to end this man’s miserable life. And oh, how he wanted to.

But the precious bundle in his arms deserved more. She had shown him peace. He would not repay her with bloodshed. It took every shred of self control he had left to contain his simmering rage.

“Remove yourself,” Nevander spoke with deadly calm, “or I cannot guarantee your safety.”

“I will do no such-” Lord Wynlar began, but his wife, who seemed to have a tiny bit more sense than him, yanked his arm, her beady eyes bulging from her face. He glanced at her, then back to Nevander, his eyes narrowing, then growing wide as recognition lit them.

Wynlar bowed stiffly. “Pardon, my lord.”

Nevander shouldered past them, the warmth of the foyer a stark contrast to the ice in his veins. A wide-eyed maid stood frozen by the door, her palms raised to her cheeks.

“You, get Lady Dovina and start heating a bath,” he ordered, gently laying Kallessa on a nearby divan upholstered in rich green silk and stuffed a gilt-edged pillow beneath her head.

A massive fireplace dominated one wall, its mantle adorned with ornate carvings and flanked by stern-looking ancestral portraits. The firelight cast harsh shadows across Kallessa’s features. Purplish circles surrounded her sunken eyes, her cheeks hollow and gaunt. Her clothes were torn and caked with grime, her long mahogany curls a tangled, matted mess.

Lady Wynlar’s fretful mumbling about ruined fabrics sparked a fresh wave of fury in Nevander’s chest.

Nevander pierced her with a glare. “Bring me a glass of water and a damp washcloth.”

She froze.

“Now.” His tone brooked no argument, sending Lady Wynlar scurrying towards the kitchen. Lord Wynlar was nowhere to be seen, which was good because now that his hands were free, he wanted to rip the man in half.

Lady Wynlar made it back in record time, handing the washcloth and a glass of water over with shaky hands before quickly retreating.

Alone with Kallessa, Nevander's composure cracked. He tenderly wiped her face, every stroke revealing cuts and scratches across her skin. "I'm so sorry, Kallessa," he whispered.

He cradled her head and pressed the glass to her parched lips. "Can you take a sip for me, sweetheart?"

Water dribbled down her chin, leaving a dirty trail into the neckline of her dress. Her throat never moved. He gently squeezed her cheeks, parting her lips just enough to pour a small trickle of water into her mouth. Relief washed over him when he saw her throat muscles contract in a swallow. He stroked her forehead tenderly, brushing back stray strands of her disheveled hair.

"That's right," he murmured, stroking her forehead. "We'll have you up in no time. I still haven't shown you the telescope, remember?"

The memory of her vibrant laughter in the observatory twisted like a knife in his chest. How bitterly ironic that tonight would be a full moon. One that he couldn't share with her. "Just take another sip for me, sweetheart."

A loud gasp jerked him from his reverie. Dovina stood beside him, her face a mask of horror. She'd changed into a simple gown, her curls in a long braid down her back.

"Oh my goodness, Kallessa," Dovina wailed, grabbing one of Kallessa's limp hands before quickly dropping it with a grimace. "What's wrong with her?" She scrunched her nose. "And why does she smell bad?"

Nevander's hand shook, water sloshing onto the floor. "Go ask your father," he bit out.

Her eyes widened and she backed away, a hand to her mouth as if to hold back the urge to retch. She bumped into the maid coming back downstairs with an empty bucket.

"The bath is ready, my lord."

He studied the maid for a moment. She had kind eyes that were drawn with concern and she'd readied the bath in record time. Good. One less person he'd have to worry about.

Nevander rose, cradling Kallessa against his chest. A searing pain ripped down his left arm, sharp as a dagger's edge, causing sparks to dance before his eyes. He tightened his grip, refusing to let her go.

"Dovina," he managed through gritted teeth, "come with me. Your cousin needs your help."

As he followed the maid up the richly carpeted stairs, he swore he would make this right. For Kallessa. For the peace she'd shown him, he would make this right.

Ahh, warmth. Through the flickering darkness and pain, Kallessa felt her body warming for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. But with the warmth came new stabs of pains that raked through her tender flesh, so she sunk back into that blissful oblivion, where there was no pain. But she could have sworn she heard Nevander's voice.

No, that could only be a dream. Nevander was gone.

Thirty-Nine

NEVANDER'S GAZE SWEPT THE cozy bathing chamber, the jade tiles on the walls and floors glimmering in the frosty dawn. Under different circumstances, he might have found it cozy, even inviting. But his focus was only on the large clawfoot tub, steam rising from the water in the cool sunlight streaming through the large picture window. His arms screamed at the Kallessa's weight, but he wouldn't release her just yet.

"What is your name, girl?" he asked the maid.

The young girl curtsied. "Penny, my lord." She looked tidy and even though dawn had barely broken, her dark hair was neatly braided under a starched white cap.

"Penny, do you know who she is?" Nevander nodded down to Kallessa, dirty and cold in his arms. Another pain tore through him at the sight of her.

Her lips trembled before she whispered, "yes, my lord."

He met Penny's eyes. "And you will take care of her, correct?"

Penny strode forward, resting a hand on Kallessa's cold arm. "Yes, my lord. Rest assured, I will take care of her."

Nevander nodded and gently laid Kallessa in a chair. Dovina stood silently, still in shock if Nevander could guess, but her guilt-ridden face assured him she'd do right by her cousin. With a last, lingering look at Kallessa, he left the bathing room, his boots echoing in the empty corridor.

Fatigue clawed at him, but there was no time for rest. Not yet. In the library, he penned a hasty letter to his mother, the words blurring before his eyes:

Mother,
Send Shaydn. Armed escort. Teansong. Urgent.
Lord Wynlar's crimes against his niece require swift justice.
- N

The wax seal barely cooled before shouts erupted from below. Nevander's hand instinctively went to his sword hilt as he descended the stairs, ready for anything.

In the entrance hall, two dozen sentries stood at attention, creating a wall of steel between Lord Wynlar and a sandy haired boy with a satchel. Beside him, an older woman dressed in somber gray clutched a black bag, her steely gaze matching Nevander's own.

Nevander focused on her first. "Are you the healer?" he asked, ignoring Wynlar's blustering in the background.

The woman nodded curtly. "Aye."

"Come with me," he commanded, leading her towards the stairs. As they passed Wynlar, Nevander caught the healer's muttered, "I hate that old scarecrow." He couldn't agree more.

At the base of the stairs, he called for Dovina. The girl appeared, her face drawn with worry. "Dovina, assist the healer in any way she requires."

He strode back to the doorway and called the young boy. "How fast is your horse, lad?"

The boy's chin lifted proudly. "Fastest in all of Dracia, my lord."

"Prove it," Nevander challenged, holding out the sealed letter. "Three silvers now, two more if this reaches the queen's hands by sundown."

A broad grin split the boy's face, his dark eyes sparkling with determination. "I can do better than that. I'll have it to there by teatime."

"Five silvers it is, then," Nevander said, dropping the coins into the boy's eager palm.

As the roan horse thundered away, Nevander finally turned to face Lord Wynlar. Fury contorted his face, spittle flying as he demanded answers.

This man had inflicted years of pain on Kallessa. Lording over her ancestral home, not even acknowledging her as family. Nevander tried to reign in his patience, but the vision of Kallessa, pale and filthy, played on repeat in his mind. In three long strides, Nevander closed the distance between them. "Kneel before your sovereign," he said, his voice low and dangerous.

Wynlar's nostrils flared, his chest heaving with rage. This man had no idea what rage was. No idea of how close Nevander was to doing something that couldn't be undone.

Nevander's hand tightened on his sword hilt. "Don't give me an excuse to permanently put you on your knees."

For a long moment, neither man moved. Then, slowly, grudgingly, Wynlar sank to one knee, the tendons in his neck straining with the effort to swallow his pride.

"Lower," Nevander crooned, a dark satisfaction curling in his gut.

Wynlar's forehead nearly touched the ground, his hands splayed on the gravel.

Nevander stood in silence, knowing the only thing in Wynlar's narrowed field of vision would be his dirty boots. "I am a merciful prince, Lord Wynlar. Remember that when you and your wife pack your belongings. You will vacate this estate immediately."

Lady Wynlar's gasp was drowned out by her husband's roar of outrage. Wynlar lunged to his feet, but before he could take a step, three swords pressed against his throat.

Nevander didn't even spare him a glance as he strode into the house and slammed the door with a satisfying thud, cutting off Wynlar's impotent protests.

Nevander's ears rang as he slumped against the door, his left shoulder screaming in agony. Upstairs, Dovina, the healer, two maids, and Kallessa remained - the only souls left in the Wynlar estate.

His boots dragged across the polished parlor floor, and he collapsed onto the couch where Kallessa had lain, her scent still lingering on the silk fabric. His fingers trembled as he reached for the nearby glass, downing the last drops of water in desperate gulps. It wasn't enough to quench his thirst or wash away the bitter taste of his anger.

Leaning back, Nevander closed his eyes. Just a moment to catch his breath, then he'd check on Kallessa. Make sure she was alright. His chest tightened at the memory of her pale face, her body limp in his arms.

A bone-deep exhaustion crept through his limbs as his pulse slowed. The adrenaline that had fueled him was ebbing away, leaving behind a sickly hollowness in his gut.

Just a moment more.

No.

Nevander's eyes snapped open. Sleep could wait. Kallessa couldn't.

With a groan, he pushed himself to his feet. The room swam before him, but he steadied himself against the couch. One step at a time. One step closer to her.

The maid had settled Kallessa into an airy bedroom with gauzy curtains that filtered the morning sun. The sight of Kallessa, pale and still beneath a mountain of quilts, made his breath catch. Her hair and skin were rid of filth and she no longer smelled like that horrible dark cell, but of fresh lavender soap and clean linens. Now her chilling lack of color was easy to see, her lips still tinged a pale blue. He traced his finger along her cheekbone. It was like ice, although the room was toasty warm thanks to the blazing hearth.

"Go rest, my lord," the healer urged, her brow furrowed. "I'll summon you if there's any change."

Nevander's jaw clenched. "No. I have to be here when she awakens." He raked an upholstered chair to the bedside, his left shoulder screaming in protest as he sank into it. Yanking off his muddy boots, he hissed at the pain lancing through his old injury. He plunked the boots down on the plush rug and leaned his head back against the cushion, cradling his shoulder, massaging the old injury.

"What have you done to your shoulder, my lord?"

He froze, glancing up to find the healer watching him intently. He thought she'd already left, but there she stood, concern etching her weathered face. This woman was Dracian, one of his own people–people he'd sworn to protect, people he'd failed. Would it matter to her that he'd let so many of her countrymen perish?

"It is my duty to help," she said softly. "How can I be of assistance, my prince?"

The compassion in her eyes shocked him. “Just an old war injury… blasted ball to the shoulder. I guess I overdid it today.” The words tumbled from his lips, a rare moment of honesty amidst the half-truths and evasions he usually gave. It must have been exhaustion.

The healer nodded and left the room without a word. Bitterness flooded Nevander’s mouth. It seemed it did matter to her. He leaned back, letting the familiar ache envelop him. A fitting punishment for his failures.

Footsteps approached, and the healer reappeared, carrying a steaming teacup and a damp cloth. The pungent scent of herbs filled the air.

She set the teacup on the mahogany side table with a soft clink and folded the cloth into a neat square. “Let me see your shoulder,” she commanded, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Nevander bristled. He didn’t need some nanny fussing over him like a child. But her stern look reminded him of his mother’s gaze when he’d been a stubborn child. With a resigned sigh, he unbuttoned his shirt, exposing the swollen, mottled flesh.

The healer handed him the teacup. “It’s just chamomile tea. Drink it.”

Nevander took the cup, wrapping his fingers around the warm porcelain. As he took a sip, the hot, soothing tea filled his mouth with a pleasant apple flavor.

She pressed the hot cloth to his shoulder, securing it with a ribbon, and the heat instantly eased the throbbing pain. An unexpected lump formed in Nevander’s throat.

“My grandson,” the healer said softly, her gaze distant, “didn’t utter a single word for nearly a year after returning from the war.”

She drifted to the window, her gnarled fingers resting upon the pane as she stared outside. “And when he finally spoke, all he did was cry for six months.”

She turned, pale eyes glistening in the morning light. “And then, one day, he smiled.”

She walked to the door, pausing on the threshold. “One day, you will too.”

This time when Kallessa felt the heat, it was a heavy weight upon her body, sinking her down, down, down into more blissful warmth. But the pain still shot up her throat and every breath hurt her chest, the rasping agony clawing at her lungs. No, it was better to stay in the darkness where the anguish couldn't reach. But wasn't there someone she was forgetting? A soothing, deep voice whispered in her ear, the softest stroke across her cheek, a gentle caress that stirred fractured memories. She fought for a moment, straining to keep that comforting touch, to reach that beckoning voice, but then the darkness overcame her and she sank back down into the abyss.

Nevander's neck cracked as he stirred from his nap, stiff but his shoulder blessedly pain free. Kallessa's face had a hint of color now, her skin no longer ice cold when he brushed her cheek. Still, every breath she took was a labored gasp.

Yet even bruised and scratched, she was the loveliest woman he'd ever known. Words bubbled up in his throat—apologies, pleas for forgiveness—but died on his lips. If only she'd open those golden eyes. He'd take her anger, her hatred, anything but this deathly stillness.

Come back to me.

But he had to tear himself away, even if for a short time, because there was no way around it, he stunk. And he was dirty. And starving.

Penny had put him in a guest room that was only two doors down from Kallessa. The chambers were unmistakingly masculine with dark paneled walls and gleaming furniture. That magnificent four-poster bed piled high with pillows begged him to collapse into its comfort and sleep for a week, but he strode past it into the adjoining bathing chamber.

The water in the huge copper tub was filthy after he'd scrubbed off days of dirt and sweat. He almost felt human again.

Dressed in fresh clothes, the scent of roasted meat drew him downstairs. A sumptuous feast awaited him on the long dining table, including roast beef and potatoes, glazed carrots, crusty bread, and pitchers of ale. He devoured three heaping plates, savoring every bite.

Night had fallen when three messages arrived, two from the capital and one from Ravenbluff Estate. Nevander tore open his mother's letter first. Queen Nahla's familiar cursive filled the page. She was sending Shaydn with twenty royal guards at first light. And Prince Tarrick.

His jaw clenched.

No.

Why would his mother send Tarrick? It was enough of a tangled mess without his sibling's involvement to botch it even more. Nevander shook his head, a crease forming between his brows. After all the idiotic, reckless things he'd done over the past year, maybe his mother now deemed him just as incompetent.

He broke the seal on the message from Ravenbluff. Ciana's terse note informed him that Queen Lyra had been found injured but recovering. King Grayson refused to leave her side as they returned to the capital. Ciana, Declan, and Castien remained to continue the search.

And that was all she wrote.

What had happened? Who was responsible? It was just like Ciana to keep it short and to the point, but she could have given him more details than that. He heaved a sigh. At least Queen Lyra was safe.

Beneath that sheet of paper were two more. One was a note from Wynna, telling him she missed him with a drawing of Akeela. A gentle smile broke onto his lips.

The last missive was the one he'd been waiting on for two weeks.

My Lord Nevander,

It appears the Wynlar Estate rightfully belongs to the surviving heir of Taerel Wynlar. Which is not Talos Wynlar.

It is Kallessa Wynlar. She is the rightful owner of the estate.

The new documents will be delivered within a few days.

A thrill raced through him. Kallessa would never be under Talos's thumb again. She had the power to make her own decisions. The freedom to make her own choices.

His eyes narrowed. He would relish the look on that monster's face when he ripped away what he'd stolen from Kallessa.

If only she would wake up.

Forty

NEVANDER'S BOOTS WORE A path in the floorboards of Kallessa's room as he paced, barely tearing his gaze from her chest, watching each struggling breath. He raised his lamp to her feverish cheeks for the hundredth time that night. Her skin glistened with sweat, pale and translucent in the flickering light.

Outside, the early winter wind clawed at the windows, its icy fingers leaving frosty patterns on the glass. Nevander stoked the fire until it roared, desperate to keep the chill at bay. Wasn't the weather supposed to be milder here?

The crunch of hooves on frozen gravel pierced the pre-dawn silence. Nevander's shoulders sagged with relief, even as dread coiled in his gut. Shaydn had arrived, thank goodness, but his wastrel brother Tarrick wouldn't be far behind.

He cast one last glance at Kallessa's still form, his fingers itching to brush a damp curl from her forehead. Instead, he clenched his fists and forced himself to leave the room.

The smell of frying bacon greeted him as he descended the stairs, his mind spinning in circles. Where was Dovina? What fresh hell awaited him with Tarrick's arrival? And most importantly–would Shaydn be able to save Kallessa?

An unfamiliar figure stood at the stove, her back to him as she worked. At his approach, she whirled, eyes widening in recognition. Before he could

stop her, she dropped into a deep curtsy, her homespun skirts brushing the floor.

"My lord," she croaked, head bowed. "It is an honor to serve you."

Nevander's jaw clenched. He despised the deference, the constant reminder of the divide between himself and the common folk. It was no wonder he'd craved anonymity at Ravenbluff.

"Please," he said, gentling his voice, "there's no need for such formality. And you are...?"

The woman straightened, crow's feet crinkling as she smiled. Her curly silver hair haloed her cheeks, rosy from the heat. "Matilda, my lord. Cook here for nigh on thirty years." Her smile faltered, a shadow passing over her rounded features. "Long before Talos darkened our doorstep."

She turned back to the stove, her movements sharp with suppressed anger. "I loved the Wynlars. Finest family you could hope to serve." The knife in her hand flashed as she carved bacon with practiced ease. "But coin's coin, and a body's got to eat. So I stayed on, even after that bastard took over."

Matilda's knife stilled, and she turned to Nevander with a piercing stare. "How's our girl?"

Our girl. The words hit Nevander like a physical blow. How many others at Wynlar Estate loved Kallessa? A world Talos had banished her from?

She could be dying. The thought rose unbidden, and Nevander ruthlessly shoved it aside. He couldn't think like that. Shaydn was here now. If anyone could save Kallessa, it was her.

He plastered on his court smile, hating how false it felt. "She'll be up and around soon enough."

Matilda's eyes narrowed, seeing right through his facade. She brandished the knife, its tip gleaming in the firelight. "I love that girl like she was my own," she said, voice low and fierce. "She better get well, or there'll be hell to pay."

Nevander met her gaze, dropping the princely mask. "On that," he said quietly, "we are in complete agreement."

The royal guard's swift efficiency in setting up camp behind the Wynlar estate did little to ease the knot in Nevander's stomach. As the head of the guard departed after their brief meeting, the weight of the situation pressed down on him like a leaden anchor.

Shaydn wasted no time heading up to Kallessa's room, a large leather satchel filled with supplies tucked under her arm.

In her haste, she grasped Penny's arm, beckoning the maid to follow, barely sparing the young woman a greeting in her rush. But Nevander didn't care about formalities or niceties. All that mattered was Kallessa's life hanging precariously in the balance.

That left him to deal with Tarrick. The prince had arrived last, his entourage lagging behind by a few miles. And he was already drunk.

Nevander sighed heavily as he watched his older brother stagger through the estate doors, flanked by a small group of servants carrying his belongings. The prince's face was flushed, his eyes glazed over even at this early hour. Nadie, Dovina's wide-eyed maid, rushed to his side as he leaned on her, his arm around her narrow shoulders.

He might be a coward for hiding in the shadows of the parlor, not greeting his brother, but he didn't care. He'd reached his threshold for dealing with problematic people for today. Let him sleep it off. Nadie guided Tarrick to a guest room, his brother not sparing a glance in Nevander's direction. At least that was one less immediate problem to deal with.

He collapsed into the parlor's plush armchair, exhaustion threatening to overwhelm him. Shaydn had firmly denied him entry to Kallessa's room, leaving him to wait helplessly downstairs. Every faint sound from upstairs sent his heart racing, his imagination conjuring worst-case scenarios. Yet the fatigue tore at his resolve. He'd let his eyes close, just for a moment—

"Is it true?" Dovina's shrill voice shattered the silence.

Nevander's eyes snapped open, irritation flaring at the interruption. "Is what true?" he asked, struggling to keep his tone even.

She marched over and flopped down unceremoniously on the couch next to him, her skirts billowing around her in a flurry of ruffled fabric. Nevander guessed spending time with him had ridded the young girl of any formality she'd once felt toward her prince. Too bad, he rather missed the respectful deference. He slid his weary body over to make room, turning to face her with a resigned expression.

“Is it true that Prince Tarrick is really here?” she demanded breathlessly, her eyes wide and sparkling with fervor.

By the Axan moon, no. Why did Dovina suddenly care about his wastrel brother’s presence?

He raised his eyebrow. “He’s upstairs asleep right now, recovering from his travels.” From his early morning drunk.

“In which room?” she persisted, leaning forward.

What did it matter which bedchamber Tarrick currently occupied? Nevander shook his head. “Ah, the one at the end of the hall on the east wing.”

Dovina squealed in delight, the high-pitched noise sending a piercing pain shooting into his ears. He winced, grimacing at her girlish excitement over his cad of a brother.

“That’s the room right next to mine!” She grabbed Nevander’s hands impulsively, eyes shining.

He stared at her grimly for a long moment before abruptly extracting his hands from her grasp. Rising to his feet, he strode from the parlor toward the front door, leaving the ridiculously starry-eyed girl gaping after him, a besotted grin still plastered across her face.

The icy air felt rejuvenating after the warm house, helping him to wake up. He strode across the tan grasses to the camp behind the estate, his boots leaving imprints on the frosty blades, nodding mechanically to the soldiers he passed. His feet carried him forward until he spotted a familiar figure.

Slouched on a canvas chair, whittling a chunk of wood into what looked like a wolf, was Risal, the oldest, meanest, crankiest guard in the ranks. One that was loyal to the death and didn’t take any crap. His weathered face creased in concentration, deftly shaping the figure with the blade in his gnarled hands.

The grizzled man glanced up, greeting Nevander with a nod and a grunt of recognition. Risal had been part of the palace guard for as long as Nevander could remember, a constant presence throughout his childhood.

Nevander nodded back in greeting, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Risal, how would you like to stay in the estate while you’re here? I have a certain young lady who needs guarding.”

The waiting was unbearable. Nevander's boots crunched on the gravel paths as he strode around the estate, his heart racing with each step. Remnants remained of the country estate before Talos took over. The swaying river birch lined pathways that now housed stark rows of shrubbery. The cottage gardens forced into boxy lines and rows of evenly spaced rosebushes. All the softness of Kallessa, crowded out by strict order and total lack of imagination.

The stables were the saddest part. Hidden from the public eye, they were left to the elements, unused and unloved. Where Kallessa's mother once bred the finest Reykian herds, now only a couple dozen work horses remained.

He ran a calloused hand along the worn wood of a stall door. How many of Kallessa's cherished memories were etched into these very walls?

The sweet scent of apples filled his nostrils as he fed Sunu, her velvety muzzle tickling his palm. Kallessa's voice echoed in his mind, painting vivid pictures of her mother tenderly caring for the mare, of her father's pride as she chose her first horse.

His chest ached. Everywhere he looked, he saw her. In the stories she'd told about her little brother, Blain, chasing the horses playfully through these stalls, of summers spent splashing in the lake, of evenings staring at the stars.

The last time he'd seen her eyes, her lashes dusted with snowflakes, haunted him at every turn.

He followed the dirt path around the stables, his breath misting in the chill air. There he found the woodshed and a pile of logs awaiting their fate beside a large stump. He grasped the well-worn axe, its handle smooth against his palms.

He grabbed a log and balanced it on the stump. With a grunt that was part exertion, part anguish, he brought the blade down. The log split with a satisfying thunk, the two halves falling to the dry grass. More. He needed more.

Again and again, he swung the axe, each stroke a desperate attempt to cleave away the pain that threatened to consume him.

The scent of sap and oak filled the air, mingling with the salt of his sweat. His left shoulder screamed in protest, but he welcomed the pain. It was a blessed distraction from the memories of Kallessa that assailed him at every turn.

Again, he swung the axe.

Again.

Again.

He finally paused, gasping for breath and glanced around for more, but he'd chopped every last log in sight. His body trembled with exhaustion, but his mind still had a death grip on him. What if she never recovered? What if he never got the chance to explain, to make things right? The axe fell from his hands, and he sank down on the stump, surrounded by a pile of logs, severed in half.

Forty-One

KALLESSA AWOKE WITH A start, her entire body throbbing in excruciating agony. A horrible, acrid stench assaulted her nostrils, burning her throat as she gasped for air. Her mouth fell open, whether to scream, cry, or simply make the torment stop, she couldn't tell. But before a sound could escape her lips, a firm hand clamped down on her jaw, forcing her mouth to remain agape as a hot, pungent-tasting liquid was unceremoniously poured down her throat. She struggled against the iron grip, desperate to resist, but had no choice but to swallow the foul concoction lest she choke. Each agonizing gulp felt like a knife stabbing her insides, and each wheezing inhale was as labored as if she were breathing through the narrowest of straws.

After every ragged breath, more of the acrid liquid was ruthlessly poured into her mouth, while an unyielding hand held her head immobile in its iron grip. Swallow after excruciating swallow, Kallessa struggled against her tormentor, writhing in vain. Sobs wracked her body as the foul concoction seared her throat and insides. Finally, the merciless hand released her and she fell back onto the pillows, shaking uncontrollably from the agony that ravaged her from within.

A strange woman spoke, her harsh accent unfamiliar. "The prince must not see this. He wouldn't understand and would try to stop us. Go check the door, Penny."

Faint footsteps walked away, only to return moments later.

“He’s outside, behind the stables,” the other voice said, quivering, but almost familiar, though Kallessa couldn’t quite place it before the hard hand gripped her jaw again, forcing her head back.

“I’m sorry,” the harsh voice uttered, laced with something like regret, before pouring more of the scalding liquid into Kallessa’s mouth again and again. She choked and sputtered, her slender frame convulsing as she fought against the torment, until finally the darkness claimed her once more.

As the sun carved its path across the winter sky, Nevander’s gaze drifted toward the house more and more. Finally, he could take it no more. His body ached as if he’d just fought a battle as he trudged toward Wynlar estate. Exhaustion clouded his mind, each trembling step an effort.

Murmurs drifted from Kallessa’s room as he climbed the stairs. His brother’s voice. Nevander’s jaw clenched. What was Tarrick doing in there?

He burst through the door. The pungent odor of Shaydn’s concoction assaulted his nostrils as she stirred a murky liquid, her silver-blonde hair coiled tightly at her nape. But it was Tarrick who drew Nevander’s attention-leaning over Kallessa, studying her with an almost predatory gaze.

A primal surge of protective fury coursed through Nevander. He yanked Tarrick away, spinning him around. “Get away from her,” he growled.

Tarrick tugged his arm free, his expression one of mild annoyance. Gone was the lush from earlier; now he looked every inch the polished prince. His clothes were neat and pressed, his dark hair combed and face smoothly shaved. He looked as fresh and polished as Nevander felt disheveled and worn.

“It’s nice to see you too, brother.”

Ignoring him, Nevander strode to Kallessa’s bedside. Her flushed cheeks and roving eyes beneath closed lids sent a spike of panic through him. He touched her fevered brow, and she flinched, a voiceless moan escaping her lips.

“Why does she look worse?” he demanded, whirling on Shaydn. “Is she in pain?”

Shaydn's icy eyes studied him. "Van, when was the last time you ate?" After a weighted pause, she added, "Or bathed?"

He clenched his fists. "Who cares?" he snapped, gesturing urgently at Kallessa. "How is she doing?"

Tarrick sauntered up, glancing dismissively at the bed where Kallessa lay unconscious. "I don't see the appeal, honestly. She's not nearly as pretty as that girl you had at the last winterfest. Remember her? The one with the huge—"

He didn't get a chance to finish the crude remark. White-hot rage exploded in Nevander's chest. He swung at Tarrick's smirking face, but his fist only met air.

"She must be some good tail for you to care that much," Tarrick taunted, leaning back.

A roar tore from Nevander's throat. "I'm going to kill you!" He lunged again, but Tarrick was too quick. Instead, his brother's fist slammed into Nevander's temple, and an explosion of pain burst across his head.

Nevander stumbled back, stars bursting across his vision. The force of the blow sent him crashing into the nightstand, knocking over a glass of water that shattered on the floor in a spray of shards. He shook his head, trying to clear the dizzying haze as Shaydn rushed over.

"What are you doing?" She demanded, her harsh accent thickening with anger.

Nevander wanted to yell. *Me? What about him?* But no sound came out. A curtain of blackness crept into the edges of his vision as waves of dizziness washed over him.

Kallessa.

His legs gave out, and he slumped to the floor, giving in to days of relentless exhaustion. He could no longer fight it.

I'm sorry.

He desperately tried to raise his head, but he couldn't. His body stopped responding to his commands.

No.

But the darkness ate at the edges of his mind, forcing him to succumb. And he crumpled, his breath leaving him in a reluctant sigh.

As consciousness slipped away, Tarrick's words drifted to him, muffled and distant.

"Well, it seems he really does love her."

The words echoed in Nevander's mind as oblivion claimed him, leaving him to wonder if he'd imagined them-or if his brother had seen right through him all along.

Through the haze of pain and confusion, Kallessa could have sworn she heard Nevander's voice, but it didn't sound right. A razor sharp edge of agony laced through his usually smooth baritone, followed by an anger as harsh as a hail storm battering against a windowpane.

She needed to help him, to soothe away whatever was causing him such distress. Kallessa struggled against the invisible bindings of darkness that held her captive, fighting with every ounce of her strength to break free from their relentless grasp so she could reach him. But try as she might, the inky tendrils wouldn't release her. Before, the darkness had been an embrace, a haven from the searing pain that lanced through her, but she couldn't hide any longer. Not when Nevander needed her.

Forty-Two

NEVANDER'S EYELIDS FLUTTERED AS a blinding golden light pierced his eyes. He groaned, turning over, pain reverberating through his skull. Why did his head hurt so badly? As he inhaled the lavender scent of the soft cotton sheets, it came back to him in a rush. He snapped his head up, his gaze darting around the opulent bedchamber, taking in the rich furnishings and ornate decor.

A torso of a stout man in a tailored black uniform with intricate silver embroidery swam into focus. Nevander's gaze traveled up to the face of who he thought it must be. Sure enough, it was Castor, his stinking brother's valet, his droopy mustache and kindly eyes unmistakable.

"My lord," Castor's soothing voice washed over him. "I've been waiting for you to awaken."

Nevander flipped over, his body aching with every movement. The valet smiled gently at him. "I'm so sorry. You've had a rough time of it?"

That was the understatement of the century. But Nevander actually liked Castor. The valet had a warm, affable manner that put him at ease. He was the only one who could handle Tarrick's drunken antics with unflappable calm and grace. Castor was always ready to serve, and knew just how to deal with surly, hungover princes in a way that soothed rather than aggravated.

"Hi Castor," Nevander croaked, his voice thick with sleep. He gingerly touched his right eye, wincing as his fingers grazed the swollen lid. Damn Tarrick.

“I’m afraid you have a bit of a shiner there, my lord,” the valet said, his face impassive though his eyes twinkled. “But I hear the ladies love that kind of roguish look.”

A reluctant chuckle escaped Nevander’s lips. Trust Castor to find humor in the situation.

“Shall I have a bath heated for you?” the valet continued. “And while you wait, I will send Penny up with some food.”

Nevander’s stomach rumbled loudly at the mention of food. “That sounds wonderful, Castor. Thank you.”

Castor moved to the door, then reappeared moments later with a glass of water and a white powder wrapped in translucent paper. He laid it on the nightstand next to the bed. “For your head, and whatever else aches. Shaydn sent it in last night before she retired.”

Nevander froze, the healer’s name ringing in his ears. Last night? A twinge of unease prickled at the back of his neck. “Castor, what time is it?”

“I believe it’s close to eleven in the morning, my lord.”

Nevander’s mind reeled. How long had he been out? “And... what day would it be?”

Castor’s expression remained impassive. “If you’re asking how long you’ve been asleep, my lord, that would be since yesterday afternoon.”

Nevander’s jaw dropped. So much time lost. What about Kallessa? His heart raced, fear clawing at his throat.

Before he could voice his panic, Castor’s gentle smile appeared, as if he’d read Nevander’s mind. “The young lady’s fever has broken.”

Nevander’s muscles ached as he strode towards Kallessa’s room, his heart pounding with each step. He paused at the doorway, drinking in the sight of her laying peacefully, her cheeks and lips a soft pink. Her chest rose and fell with deep, even breaths—a stark contrast to the lifeless figure he’d rescued from that wretched cell. He wanted to haul her into his arms. But he forced his steps to retreat from the room. He had something else to deal with.

He clenched his jaw, and the dull ache around his eye stabbed like a dagger. He forced his face to relax. What, now he couldn’t even clench his

jaw without his eye hurting?

He found Tarrick lounging in one of the estate's sitting rooms, sprawled across a chaise longue with a crystal glass of amber liquid in hand. The familiar sight made Nevander's blood boil.

"Good morning, little brother," Tarrick drawled, raising his glass in a mocking salute. His eyes glinted with amusement. "Sleep well?"

Nevander wanted to clench his jaw, could imagine his teeth grinding in frustration. Instead, he asked, "Why did Mother send you?"

Tarrick merely shrugged, taking a casual sip from his crystal glass. "Oh, she didn't."

"Then why are you here?"

"I was bored," Tarrick replied.

"Go be bored somewhere else," Nevander growled, fighting to keep his temper in check. Tarrick had always known exactly which buttons to push.

Tarrick's lips curled into a sardonic smile. "And miss out on your latest folly?"

The implication stung more than Nevander cared to admit. "Kallessa isn't a whim or a distraction."

"No?" Tarrick's eyes narrowed, skepticism etched across his face.

Nevander held his brother's stare, refusing to rise to the bait this time. Now that he'd gotten enough sleep to think clearly.

Yet his words tumbled out, raw and unguarded. "I'm a bloody liar and a screwup. I don't deserve her, but I want her like a man dying of thirst craves water. She's everything pure and good, and I've no right to taint that with my damaged soul. But I can't stay away. I'll fight everyone in my path, even if it's my undoing."

Silence stretched, as every unspoken word between them lived and died behind their stubborn lips.

Then, to Nevander's shock, Tarrick's mocking smile softened into something genuine. Warmth filled his dark eyes, a glimpse of the brother he'd once known shining through. "Good for you, Van. Don't you bloody well let go of her."

Before Nevander could respond, light footsteps drew his attention to the doorway. Dovina glided in, resplendent in a pale blue gown that accentuated her delicate features. Her golden hair cascaded down her back in gentle waves.

Nevander retreated to a far corner, out of her line of sight. He had no desire to explain his black eye or hear Tarrick's version of events.

"Good morning, my lord," Dovina greeted, dipping into an elegant curtsy before Tarrick.

Tarrick's eyes raked over her appreciatively, his mask of cynicism firmly back in place. "Well, good morning to you, my dear." His voice dipped lower, taking on a sultry tone that made Nevander's skin crawl. "You are a vision of loveliness this fine day."

Nevander's stomach churned as he watched the flirtatious exchange unfold. He knew all too well how quickly Tarrick's interests could turn inappropriate. That's precisely why he'd assigned Risal to watch over Dovina.

As if summoned by Nevander's thoughts, the gruff old guard's heavy boots thudded on the marble floor behind Dovina. Relief washed over Nevander—until Tarrick looked from Risal to him and burst into uproarious laughter.

"Get over here and have a drink with me, you old bastard," Tarrick called out, beckoning Risal over.

To Nevander's horror, the seasoned guard ambled across the room and accepted a generous pour from Tarrick's crystal decanter.

In that moment, the bitter truth settled in Nevander's gut like a lead weight. He was no longer in control of anything at Wynlar Estate.

Nevander's nostrils flared at the earthy scent wafting from the large stone kitchen. He found Shaydn and Matilda huddled over a steaming pot, the healer dropping in herbs while the cook stirred in a reddish powder that puffed up in a cloud.

Shaydn turned, her attempt at a smile faltering as her gaze landed on Nevander's black eye. "I have a poultice for that," she said, reaching for her bag.

"Just sit down and talk to me," he said gently.

As Shaydn perched on a wooden stool, Nevander studied her. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, worry lines etched deep in her brow. An unasked

question seemed to hover on her lips.

Without warning, he pulled her into a crushing embrace. She stiffened at first, but gradually relaxed into the hug before he pulled back and released her.

"Thank you," he murmured, his throat tight. "You've saved two people I care about."

She stood silently, rubbing her arms as if to ward off a chill, her gaze averted.

"Now, ask me," Nevander urged gently. He saw it in her eyes, the unspoken questions.

Shaydn's eyes flickered, a war of emotions playing across her face. "How is Castien?" she whispered.

"Better, I think. There's a new determination in him." His thoughts flickered back to Castien before he'd left Ravenbluff, stuffing his bruised and battered face, a glint in his eyes.

Her fingers twisted together. "Does he—does he remember me?"

The hope in her eyes was a fragile thing. Nevander's stomach clenched, knowing he had to crush it.

"No," he said softly.

The healer's throat bobbed as she gave a slight nod. "Good," she murmured, averting her gaze out the kitchen window. A flicker of something indecipherable passed across her face, gone as quickly as it had appeared.

Castien had been deliriously ill while Shaydn had ministered to him, the poison keeping him teetering on the brink of death for months. Who knew what had transpired between healer and patient during that long, dark time, but it had left an indelible mark on her. Even in the throes of delirium, Castien had probably been bloody charming, the roguish prince captivating her despite his dire condition. But this was one person the prince of Krithadea didn't need to know about. Shaydn Zhakrova was Nevander's best kept secret, her identity only known to the two of them.

"It's for the best," he said, the words feeling leaden on his tongue.

Her cool eyes rested on his face, the afternoon light filtering through the window, rendering them as translucent as the frosty sky outside. She nodded once more before her face became impassible, her thoughts closed off to him.

He felt like a cad saying such a thing. But it was true. If Castien remembered her, it could only end in disaster. He'd either pursue her out of misplaced gratitude or use his considerable resources to uncover every detail of her past.

Then he might feel obligated to kill her.

Dovina, it seemed, had found her backbone, standing up to her parents in Nevander's name. He hated to admit it, but the silly girl had won over some of his affections. It was hard to stay angry with her when she carried around so much enthusiasm for the world. Perhaps there was hope for her yet.

As night fell, he paused at Kallessa's door, his hand hesitating on the handle before he pushed it open.

The sight that greeted him made him blink in surprise. Dovina lay slumped in a chair beside Kallessa's bed, her fingers still tangled in the strings of her harp. Her head lolled back at an uncomfortable angle, her blonde curls in disarray. Nevander shook his head. One of these days, she would break some poor sod's heart.

"Penny," he called softly, beckoning the maid. "See Lady Dovina to her chambers, please."

As Penny ushered the groggy girl away, Nevander gazed at Kallessa. Thankfully, she was doing well enough that Shaydn could rest. That left him alone with her for the first time in what seemed forever. The firelight cast a warm glow on her skin, no longer deathly pale but flushed with life. His throat tightened. She looked so small, so fragile, swallowed up by the blankets.

Nevander gently brushed a stray lock from her face, his fingertips grazing her soft skin.

Shaydn had said Kallessa could wake at any moment. His heart raced at the thought. What would he say? How could he explain everything that had happened?

Nevander sank into the chair Dovina had vacated, his eyes never leaving Kallessa's face. The steady rise and fall of her chest hypnotized him, a reminder of how close he'd come to losing her.

He was not the same man who'd removed his mask at the ball, revealing only a fraction of his true self. Now, as he watched over her, Nevander felt stripped bare, all his defenses crumbling.

"I'll tell you everything," he whispered. "Who I am, what I've done... all of it. And if you decide you want nothing to do with me, I'll respect that."

The words tasted bitter on his tongue, but he knew they were true. If Kallessa rejected him, he would walk away. The thought sent a physical pain through his chest, but he pushed on, allowing himself to imagine a life without her.

"Maybe I'll build an orphanage," he mused. "Or design ships for wounded soldiers. I don't know. But I do know that whatever happens, you've changed me, Kallessa. And I can never go back to who I was before."

Nevander leaned forward, taking her small hand in his. "Just wake up," he pleaded softly. "Wake up and let me explain. That's all I ask."

As if in response, Kallessa's fingers twitched in his grasp.

Forty-Three

EVERY HOUSE HAS A personality, a certain essence from years of hosting its inhabitants. The walls absorb the laughter and tears and smells of home, becoming imbued with memories.

That's how Kallessa knew where she was before even opening her eyes. If she dwelled on that familiar essence, she could hear Blain's laughter echoing down the hall as he chased the family cat, her mother's off-tune singing from the stables, her father's pen scratching parchment as vanilla scented pipe smoke wafted through his office door.

She even knew what room she was in. The guest bedroom, the one with the east-facing bay window, the one she'd snuck off to when she wanted to be alone with the sunrise. That sunrise now fell across her eyelids, tinting her unseen world a soft pink.

Instead of opening her eyes, Kallessa took stock of her body. Her limbs felt sore and heavy, her stomach hollow and aching, but the agonizing pain in her head and throat were blessedly gone.

She tried to swallow, but her parched throat triggered a coughing fit. Her ribs screamed in protest as she gasped for air.

A chair scraped across the floor and stumbling footsteps had her jerking her eyes open. Everything was blurry, and she struggled to blink, trying to clear her vision.

Warm, powerful arms encircled her. A glass appeared before her, and she grasped it with trembling hands. Water cascaded down her chin as she

gulped greedily, the cool liquid pure ecstasy. She drained the glass and fell back against the pillows with a sigh, her eyes fluttering shut.

"Better?" a familiar, deep voice rumbled. One she didn't think she would ever hear again. She suddenly became attuned to the warm arm still wrapped around her shoulders, the deep breathing of another being with her.

Her eyes fluttered open. "You," she whispered, barely a breath escaping her lips.

Nevander's wistful smile wrenched her insides. "Yes, it's me. I'm sorry I was late." The soothing timbre of his voice resonated through her bones.

Confusion clouded her mind. "Late? Why are you here… at all?" She tried to order her fractured memories, but came up short. "Why am I here?" Panic surged through her veins. "Uncle Talos—"

A growl vibrated from Nevander's chest. "He will never touch you again." The ferocity in his words should have terrified her, but instead, it flooded her veins with a sense of security she hadn't known in years.

Suddenly, he crushed her against him, his heady scent overwhelming her. Hot tears burned her eyes as the memory of that freezing, dark cell rushed back. She clung to him desperately, craving his heat, the strength in his embrace.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured, rocking her gently.

"But why are you here?" she asked again, voice muffled against his shirt.

Nevander pulled back, his intense gaze boring into her. Emerald eyes flecked with silver in the morning light. Dark circles and stress lines marred his unshaven face. A purplish bruise swelled under one eye.

And she'd never seen anything more beautiful.

Her eyebrows drew together. "Is that a black eye?"

His mouth quirked into a half-smile. "I'll tell you about it later."

Then reality crashed over her. This was Prince Nevander Lionskye of the kingdom of Dracia. Cradling her in bed.

This was all wrong. "My lord," she began, the honorific feeling alien on her tongue.

He gripped her tighter. "Please," he whispered into her hair, "please don't call me that. I am still Nevander. Your Nevander. And I'm so sorry I deceived you. It was wrong."

Dizziness washed over Kallessa as she struggled to make sense of his words, to piece together the fragments of memory that eluded her. It was all too much to process on an empty stomach and with her limbs still heavy

with bone-deep exhaustion. She wanted answers, but the effort of forming coherent thoughts seemed utterly draining.

"You asked why I'm here," Nevander said softly.

"Yes," she replied, her brow furrowed.

"What do you remember?"

Kallessa's mind whirled. She searched those piercing green depths that had haunted her dreams since the masquerade ball. A night that now seemed like a beautiful illusion, shattered by harsh reality.

"You are the prince, are you not?" Her voice trembled as she tried to put distance between them. But even as she pushed back, her gaze remained locked with his, that intense, agonized look darkening with anguish.

Nevander's expression was raw, vulnerable. "I know my reputation precedes me, but I beg you to look past it. It's just me, Nevander. I swear I'm no different from the man you first met."

The man she'd first met... That rough soldier whose piercing stare had sent shivers down her spine, a heady mix of fear and intrigue. And now, to learn that same man was a prince—a prince she should never have crossed paths with.

"That may be true, but I know we must part ways. Please don't make this harder than it is already for me." Kallessa's voice quavered. "As soon as I can dress, I will head back home and out of your hair, my lord."

Kallessa didn't even know what day it was, or why Uncle Talos hadn't come breathing down her neck, demanding her removal. It hurt to be here again, surrounded by memories, only to have to leave once more. It had been five long years since she'd stepped foot on these grounds, since the day of the will reading when Talos kicked her out with barely the clothes on her back.

Nevander's, no, *the prince's*, eyes looked stricken at her words. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a commotion at the door.

"Cousin!" Dovina's shrill voice pierced the air as she burst into the room, nearly knocking Nevander aside in her haste. She flung herself at Kallessa,

enveloping her in a suffocating embrace. “I’m so sorry! Please forgive me. I had no idea what happened. Oh, I’m such a foolish girl!”

Kallessa’s heart clenched as Nevander’s warmth disappeared, leaving a cold void where his arms had been moments before. She watched him retreat to the far side of the room, his face an unreadable mask.

Dovina’s cloying rose perfume assaulted Kallessa’s senses, making her head spin. She struggled to breathe as her cousin’s frilly lace top obscured her vision.

“Give the girl some room to breathe, my lady,” a familiar voice rang out. Kallessa’s heart leapt at the sound.

“Penny?” Kallessa whispered, hardly daring to hope it could be her old friend and handmaiden.

“Yes, my lady, it’s me,” the young woman confirmed with a warm smile as she strode to the bedside, a silver tray balanced gracefully in her hands. “Quit suffocating her so she can eat something. Poor dear, you must be starving after your ordeal.”

As Dovina finally released her, Kallessa’s gaze darted to Nevander. He sat motionless, staring out the window. The hollow ache in her stomach had nothing to do with hunger.

Penny fussed over her, fluffing pillows and setting the tray in her lap. The familiar robin’s egg blue china with dancing daffodils hit Kallessa with the ferocity of a bucking stallion. Her mother’s china. A tidal wave of grief crashed over her, and suddenly she couldn’t breathe.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped between sobs. “I don’t know why I’m crying.”

In an instant, Nevander was there, his face a dark thundercloud. “She’s been through enough. Give her some space.” He slid onto the bed, pulling Kallessa into his lap.

The world tilted as she found herself pressed against every hard plane of his body. Heat bloomed wherever they touched, and a dizzying cocktail of desire and comfort flooded her veins. The tray shuffled about, splashing the cup of broth before he settled them both, cocooning her in his protective hold.

“You are dismissed,” Nevander commanded Penny. “I’ll take care of her.”

Penny’s eyebrows shot up, but she curtsied and left, throwing a concerned glance over her shoulder.

“You can talk to her later, Dovina,” Nevander cut in as Dovina opened her mouth to speak. Thankfully, her cousin closed it with a snap and

retreated, the door clicking softly behind her.

Kallessa's body thrummed with awareness. Nevander's scent enveloped her, a heady mix of clove and cedar that made her head spin.

"Now relax," he whispered, his breath stirring tendrils of her hair. "You need to eat. Get your strength back."

Tears still leaked from her eyes, and he swiped them away with the pad of his calloused thumb before he reached for the plump, ripe plum and held it to her mouth, rubbing the sweet juicy fruit against her lips. She opened her mouth obediently, and he fed it to her, letting his fingers linger along her lips as he pulled away, sending tingles down her spine.

Then he had her drink the broth, then eat a tea cake. She was so enthralled by his fingers and the nearness of him, she finished everything in record time. A flush crept up her cheeks as she savored it, his masculine scent and touch sending tingles through her body.

With a full stomach and Nevander's warmth surrounding her, exhaustion crashed over Kallessa in a heavy wave. She laid her head against his chest with a contented sigh, her eyelids growing heavier by the second.

He nuzzled her hair, his scent blending with the lingering scents of sweet cakes and plums as she drifted off, cradled in his arms. She had never felt so safe, so cherished, so satisfied in her life. She knew deep down that things couldn't stay like this forever, but for the moment, she only wanted to dream. So she did.

Kallessa jolted awake to distant shouts and a prickling sense of danger. A slender woman with startling white hair stood by her bed, eyes like chipped ice.

"Drink," the stranger commanded in a lilting accent, pressing a small cup to Kallessa's lips.

Kallessa's heart raced as she pushed the cup away, struggling to sit up. Before she could demand answers, the door burst open. Her stomach clenched with dread as Uncle Talos loomed over her, a wreck of his usually impeccable self. His suit hung wrinkled and half-unbuttoned, his hair wild, his face sprouting a week's worth of splotchy gray stubble.

Whiskey fumes assaulted her as he leaned in, raising his arm. Kallessa flinched, bracing for the blow—but it never came. The white-haired woman had stepped between them, a dagger glinting at Talos's neck.

"Come an inch closer, and I will slit your throat," the stranger said, her voice unwavering despite her slight frame.

Uncle Talos's eyes narrowed dangerously, but he froze in place, wisely leaning back out of reach of her knife's deadly caress. He retreated to the edge of the room, near the doorway, before continuing his drunken tirade. "You filthy urchin," he hissed, fists clenched. "I don't know how you did it, but you will pay for this. No child of that woman—"

She didn't know what he was talking about, but a surge of defiance rose within Kallessa at her uncle's vile words. All her life, she'd endured his cruelty and disdain, but this time was different. She was no longer that helpless child whose life he had upended with a careless whim.

Kallessa pushed herself up against the pillows, ignoring the protest of her aching body. She met Talos's glare with an unwavering gaze of her own.

"You will not speak ill of my mother," she said, her voice clear and resolute despite the rawness in her throat. "She was a woman of grace, kindness, and love. Qualities you could never hope to possess."

Talos scoffed, his lips curling into a sneer. "That whore was nothing but a disgrace, seducing my brother with her low-born wiles. She deserved far worse than a carriage accident for tainting the noble Wynlar bloodline."

Every word pierced her heart, but Kallessa refused to flinch. She thought of the day she'd told Nevander she was no longer a lady. He'd told her that being a lady had nothing to do with who your parents were. She hadn't really understood his meaning then. Now she did. And with that understanding came an exhilarating freedom.

"I feel sorry for you, uncle." Even if she continued to be penniless and under his thumb, he no longer held power over her self-worth. She would honor her family's love and legacy by becoming the woman they raised her to be.

Three burly soldiers barged in, seizing the struggling Talos. Kallessa watched in shock as they wrestled him from the room, his drunken shouts fading down the hallway. Dovina's pleading voice drifted up the stairs, indistinct but unmistakable.

The blond turned back to her, cup still in hand. "Drink this," she repeated, her tone firm.

“No.” Kallessa pushed her hand away again, eyeing the stranger warily. “Who are you? What’s going on? Where’s Dovina?” A knot of dread formed in her stomach. She was afraid to ask about Nevander’s whereabouts. What if their last encounter had just been a fever dream?

The blond finally stopped trying to shove the cup at her and stood back, letting out a soft sigh. “I am Shaydn, the Dracian royal healer. The prince has never mentioned me, though, I can see that now. I am very sorry to upset you.” Her gaze was steady, her expression open and sincere as she studied Kallessa.

She’d said ‘the prince’.

“Nevander?” Kallessa asked weakly.

“Yes,” the healer replied simply.

“Where is he?”

“The prince is taking care of some business, but will be back shortly. He left you in my hands,” Shaydn explained calmly.

“What is going on?” Kallessa demanded, yanking back the blankets. She frowned as the chill air hit her body, clad only in a thin linen shift.

Shaydn looked alarmed as Kallessa moved to get up. “Where are you going?”

“To get some answers. Now either help me up, or get out of my way.” The words left Kallessa feeling lightheaded and breathless, but the determined look in her eyes must have convinced the healer. Shaydn quickly retrieved a heavy woolen robe and fur-lined slippers, helping Kallessa into them.

Kallessa stumbled into the hallway, calling for Dovina. Her cousin came running, cheeks flushed and eyes alight with an odd excitement that seemed out of place, given the circumstances.

“Oh cousin, you’re up!” Dovina exclaimed, hugging her tightly before guiding her downstairs. “You know I was so worried about you, wasn’t I, Shaydn? I’ve been asking about your health hourly. And that whole mess with father, ugh. But you forgive me, don’t you?” Her words tumbled out in a breathless rush, the pitch of her voice rising higher and higher until what she was saying made less and less sense.

Kallessa frowned, perplexed by Dovina’s giddiness. At the parlor entrance, Dovina blocked her path, eyes glinting. “Wait,” she whispered. “There’s someone here to meet you. He and I have gotten along famously. I hope you don’t mind me entertaining, with you being indisposed and all.”

Kallessa shook her head, exasperated. “Dovina, just move.”

Dovina stepped aside with a dramatic flourish. They entered the parlor to find a handsome young man lounging on the sofa. He held a crystal glass of amber liquid and eyed Penny as she set down an enormous platter of finger foods. He’d propped his stocking feet up on the silk cushions, as if he owned the place.

Dovina fluttered her eyelashes, executing a perfect curtsy. The stranger grinned wolfishly, eyes roving over her slim figure before noticing Kallessa.

He sat up, raising his glass in a mocking toast. “Ah, the lady arises,” he purred, his gaze raking over her. “So sorry my brother isn’t here to meet you, my dear. Royal paperwork, you know. Dastardly stuff. He should be back shortly, though. With documents in hand, I think.”

Kallessa’s breath caught. The family resemblance was unmistakable—the same chiseled features and arrogant bearing, though his eyes were a fathomless blue instead of Nevander’s vivid green. His frame was slighter, his hair inky black, and something in the hard angles of his face made him seem older than his years.

“Ah, where are my manners?” He smirked. “I am Prince Tarrick, Nevander’s older and much more handsome brother, at your service, my lady.”

He didn’t appear to be at anyone’s service but his own as he reached for a tart from the platter, shoving the entire pastry into his mouth in one enormous bite. Crumbs spilled down his shirt, and he chased the tart with a swig of amber liquid from a glass, draining it carelessly. He didn’t wear a wedding ring on his slim fingers. Kallessa’s gaze darted to Dovina, who stood nearby, head tilted demurely as she gazed at Tarrick with stars in her eyes.

“May I sit?” Kallessa asked, gesturing toward the sitting area.

“As the lady wishes,” Tarrick replied with a flourish.

Kallessa carefully seated herself on the right side of a worn, burgundy sofa, avoiding the spring she knew would poke her if she sat too close to the left. A wave of nostalgia washed over her, memories of happier times in this very room threatening to overwhelm her. Although many furnishings were new, the room still held the spirit of her past. But as much as she wanted to soak it all in, she forced herself to focus on the present.

“Why are we in my uncle’s parlor?” she asked, her voice steadier than she felt. “The last thing I remember was him locking me in jail for Dovina’s disappearance.” She turned a stern gaze towards her cousin. “Which you still need to explain, by the way.”

“Of course, cousin, of course. I will be happy too,” Dovina gushed. Her usual look of disdain toward Kallessa had disappeared, replaced by a sycophantic light that was disturbing.

Kallessa held up her hand, cutting her off. “But first, why are we here? Where is Uncle Talos?”

“Perhaps I can explain,” a familiar voice interjected from the doorway.

Nevander stood framed in the entryway, his appearance haggard yet triumphant, as if he had just emerged victorious from a hard-fought battle. A weary smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, hinting at the answers he carried.

Kallessa’s breath caught in her throat. If only everyone else would disappear. She wanted nothing more than to cling to him, to make sure he was real. But she couldn’t.

So, by all that was holy, he better have some explanations for this perplexing turn of events.

Forty-Four

NEVANDER GRIPPED THE PAPERS in his hand, staring at Kallessa. Her voice washed over him as he'd come in the door and he couldn't describe his relief. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, her skin still too pale, but to him, she was radiant.

"It's about time," Tarrick drawled.

Nevander's jaw clenched, his brother's sarcasm grating against his nerves. He forced himself to ignore Tarrick, focusing solely on Kallessa. This was her moment, and he'd be damned if he'd let anyone ruin it.

The worn settee creaked as he sat beside her, a spring digging into his thigh. The discomfort faded to nothing as he held out the rolled documents to her. "Here," he said, his voice low and intimate. "This is for you."

After a perplexing look, she slid the ribbon off, unrolling the documents with shaking hands. The room fell silent, the air thick with anticipation. Nevander watched her intently, noting every subtle change in her expression as she read.

Once.

Twice.

Her face drained of what little color it had, eyes widening in disbelief, lips parting in a silent gasp.

Kallessa's fingers trembled against the crisp parchment, her eyes darting back and forth as she reread each line. A wave of giddiness washed over, the words blurring before her eyes. This couldn't be possible, could it? Wynlar Estate, the ancestral home that had been so cruelly wrenched away, was rightfully hers? No wonder her uncle was frothing at the mouth.

According to the meticulously detailed documents, which bore an undeniably official seal, her uncle Talos had never truly held any legitimate claim to the estate. The realization knocked the breath from her. He'd stolen her birthright. For five agonizing years, he'd dangled her cherished family legacy before her like a twisted bargaining chip.

It seemed like hours went by before she finally looked up to find four other sets of eyes upon her. Her own eyes burned in her skull, the words from the documents seared into her mind. The parchments slipped from her grasp, fluttering to the sofa cushions.

Now she understood the reason behind Dovina's uncharacteristic behavior, the constant pleading for forgiveness, the fawning and deference toward her. Kallessa now rightfully owned Wynlar Estate, the ancestral home her cousin had spent her teenage years in. Dovina must have feared being tossed out onto the streets, just as Kallessa herself had been so many years ago. But did her cousin truly think she could inflict that same anguish upon family after all she'd been through?

And her uncle. She couldn't believe someone would treat their own kin that way, casting her out like an unwanted stray after the devastating loss of her parents and brother. Talos had been cold and callous, ripping away the only home she'd ever known without a shred of compassion for her. Kallessa's heart clenched at the bitter memories, the sting of betrayal still fresh despite the years that had passed.

She settled her gaze on Dovina, who, for the first time in her seventeen years, seemed to grasp the gravity of the situation.

"Cousin," Kallessa began, letting out a weary sigh, "you have been a pain in my behind for years." A twinge of exasperated fondness colored her words.

Dovina's face fell, tears welling in her eyes as the sting of Kallessa's words sank in. But Dovina had been just as much of a victim as Kallessa was in a way, never having the freedom to make her own choices, trapped within the gilded cage of her noble upbringing.

"I'm so sorry, Kallessa, I really am." Dovina stood, gripping the folds of her gown tightly, her shoulders sagging. Vulnerability shone through the cracks in her usually flippant demeanor.

Kallessa almost believed her. With a few more years to mature and some room to grow into herself, unshackled from the constraints of her father's iron grip, Dovina would become something greater, rather than the spoiled brat she currently embodied.

"Come here," Kallessa beckoned softly.

Dovina approached hesitantly, kneeling beside her cousin. Kallessa reached out, her fingers grazing Dovina's cheek.

"That doesn't mean I don't love you," she murmured. "You're free to stay here as long as you want, or move with your parents. It's up to you. We can figure out the rest of it, alright?"

Dovina's brow furrowed. "Does that mean I don't have to marry the neighbor?"

Kallessa blinked. "What?"

A sheepish expression crossed Dovina's features. "Oh, I forgot. You never heard the story of why we went to Ravenbluff in the first place. I guess I owe you an explanation."

Leaning back, Kallessa regarded her cousin. "I guess you do," she said, bracing herself for whatever came out of her cousin's mouth next.

Dovina quickly gave Kallessa a rundown of why she'd desperately wanted to go to the Ravenbluff ball and why she ran off with "that odious Ratliff". As she spoke, her voice wavered with emotion, recounting the torment she had endured under her father's iron fist. Kallessa listened intently, her eyes widening at the revelations. Once Dovina had finished, Kallessa's eyebrows were nearly lost in her hairline.

Could Talos truly be so heartless as to auction off his own daughter for more land? No wonder the poor girl had gone to such extremes to escape her fate. Seeing the whole situation through Dovina's eyes, Kallessa wasn't sure she wouldn't have done the same thing. And if Dovina hadn't sent them on this wild journey, she wouldn't be sitting here now, in her own

home again, surrounded by the familiar comforts she had once taken for granted.

And she never would have met Nevander. Her heart cracked at the thought of his inevitable departure.

"So," Dovina's voice pulled her back to the present, "do I have to marry the neighbor?"

Kallessa shook her head, a short, incredulous laugh escaping her lips. "Absolutely not," she reassured her cousin. "Nor anyone else you don't wish to marry."

"Oh, thank goodness!" Dovina jumped to her feet and plopped down on the chair opposite her, suddenly ignoring the looks Prince Tarrick seemed to give her. "I think I want to open a music school. And take off this horrid corset."

Forty-Five

NEVANDER'S QUILL HOVERED OVER the document, his hand trembling with suppressed rage. Talos would keep his holdings, despite nearly killing Kallessa. The memory of her frail body in that dank cell, hours from death, burned in his mind. He could still smell the putrid air, feel the chill of her skin.

"He'd only become a burden on society without something to do," Kallessa had whispered, her voice still hoarse from illness.

Nevander's jaw clenched. He'd compromised, stripping Talos of titles and authority, but it wasn't enough. The quill scratched against parchment as he signed, each stroke a battle against his instincts.

Later, out of Kallessa's earshot, he'd cornered Talos. "Step out of line once," he'd hissed, "and I'll have you before the king as a traitor." The man's eyes had widened, fear replacing his usual arrogance.

Now, two weeks later, an uneasy quiet had settled over the estate. Tarrick had departed with most of the soldiers, complaining of boredom. Dovina, freed from the shackles of an arranged marriage, had promptly lost interest in the arrogant prince.

Nevander unfolded Ciana's latest letter, the parchment crinkling under his fingers.

N,

Queen Lyra and the king have returned to the capital. Castien, Declan and I continue the search, but I suspect we're approaching this all wrong.

I'll update you soon.

It appears Castien was overdosing on fireflower tea. His attacker may have inadvertently saved his life.

Wynna sends her love. Akeela pines for you.

I pray all is well with you and Kallessa.

C

The letter fluttered to the ebony desk in the dark paneled room.

He was so tired.

Nevander's body ached, a bone-deep weariness that matched the heaviness in his heart. His bruised eye was almost healed, but the physical pain paled compared to the ache in his chest every time Kallessa looked at him.

Gone was the warmth, the spark. Now, her eyes held only cool detachment. He was no longer a man, but a title–a prince, unreachable and foreign.

That's why he'd clung to the lie for so long. He'd known this would happen, had dreaded it with every fiber of his being. How could he make her understand that her distance was tearing him apart?

He was running out of excuses to stay, but he had to try one last time. Nevander lit a lantern on the desk, its warm glow a stark contrast to the chill that had settled inside him. He spread a large sheet of parchment before him, dipped his quill in ink, and began to draw.

Forty-Six

PHYSICALLY, KALLESSA HAD NEVER felt better, her body at full strength with enough rest and food. But mentally, she was a wreck.

In the days since claiming her birthright, she'd thrown herself into action. She'd sent generous sums to the kindhearted women at the inns who had sheltered her. Patronized every business in Teansong, trying to do her part to breathe life back into the war-crippled local commerce.

A package from Princess Ciana sat on her desk—the split skirts and an invitation to discuss production plans.

She had everything she'd wanted, didn't she? Security? Status? A home of her own?

So why did emptiness gnaw at her? Why did every night seem darker and lonelier than the last?

She'd roamed every corner of Wynlar Estate, every acre, every field. Sat on a hay bale, staring around the stables where her mother once worked. Walked along the lake where she'd fished with Father and Blain. Wandered the inside of the estate from top to bottom, finding treasures of her childhood that had been locked away.

Anything and everything to avoid the prince of Dracia.

Now, as another chilly night came to an end, Kallessa stared at the ceiling, the one she'd woken to every day for the first seventeen years of her life.

Her mind drifted to Tynan, his poetic words, his false promises of the perfect life they'd have together, and it all came together like a thunderclap.

What she'd felt then was mere infatuation. She hadn't seen past the pretty words, honestly, she hadn't wanted to. She'd wanted that dream he presented, hanging on the arm of the dashing poet. It had been all about her, a fantasy of a child.

Now, her heart demanded something altogether different. Something real.

The image of Nevander—against her will—stood bold and full of color before her mind's eye. She shook her head, wanting to bury herself back under the blankets. But she was sick of this bed.

As grey dawn seeped through her curtains, Kallessa flung back the covers. She needed to clear her head, but how? His presence saturated every corner of the estate. Why did he linger when he could have left for the capital a week ago?

A soft knock sent her pulse racing. She cracked open the door, disappointment and relief warring as Shaydn's silver-blonde hair glowed in the dim light.

"May I come in?" the healer asked, her harsh accent still jarring.

"Of course." Kallessa ushered her inside, lighting a lamp and stoking the fire. Shaydn's practical riding outfit–canvas pants, wool sweater, and well-worn boots–stood in stark contrast to the light and airy bedroom.

She pulled Kallessa to the bed and sat down beside her, pulling three linen pouches from her bag.

"There are instructions on how to use them if you fall ill again." Finality laced Shaydn's words. She was leaving.

"Thank you for everything," Kallessa said. This remarkable, strange woman had brought her back from the brink of death. Instead of acknowledging Kallessa, Shaydn sat quietly, studying her. For a long moment, the healer's icy blue eyes searched Kallessa's face, thoughts flickering behind them. Finally, she spoke.

"A prince is a different breed of man," she began, her gaze ghosting to the window. "I know this because I've been around royalty my entire life."

Shaydn flicked her gaze back to Kallessa. "They are spoiled and intense and everything they do is grander and bolder and wilder than an average man. But they carry a heavy burden with them wherever they go, a weight on their shoulders that never lifts." She paused, chewing on her bottom lip briefly. "Their responsibilities are almost too much for one person to bear. And when they love someone, it's with an intensity that burns brighter than the sun."

Kallessa's breath caught. She didn't want to hear this, didn't want another reason to feel tied to Nevander.

"Did he tell you how he got that black eye?" Shaydn asked.

Kallessa had made herself not ask. She shook her head.

"I've never seen a man so out of his mind," Shaydn said, shaking her head. "He wore himself down to a nub watching over you, protecting you. I think he would have found a way to change the current of the sea if it meant saving you."

Her voice lowered. "When he saw Tarrick hovering over your unconscious form, he went mad. Ripped his brother away from you like a lion guarding its mate." She paused, shaking her head. "Then Tarrick, in his usual fashion, provoked Nevander. But Nevander was so exhausted, he missed his swing. Tarrick knocked him out cold for eighteen hours."

Kallessa's mind reeled. Nevander, always so composed, had lost control... over her? A fierce protectiveness rose within her at the thought of Tarrick punching Nevander when he was so distraught.

He'd never said a word to her about it.

She suddenly wanted to hug Nevander until he couldn't breathe. Kiss him until they were both senseless. Her skin vibrated with the longing to just touch him, thank him. If only…

"I heard he stole a mail cart to bring you here," Shaydn added. "Arrived like an avenging angel with you in his arms."

The prince had rescued her from that dark cell, carrying her when she was filthy and probably smelled like a sewer.

"But why?" Kallessa blurted, unable to stop herself. "I was just some girl, and he's—" The words stuck in her throat.

Shaydn held up a pale hand. "You are now Lady Kallessa Wynlar. Owner of Wynlar Estate, the 'Lady of Teansong', they're calling you."

The Lady of Teansong? Kallessa's lips pursed at the ridiculous moniker. Of all the preposterous—

"Are you a different person than you were two weeks ago?" Shaydn's voice cut through her thoughts.

"Of course not," Kallessa replied slowly, her brows drawn.

Shaydn's gaze pierced her. "Then why are you treating Nevander as if he is?"

He was gone.

Kallessa's heart raced as she threw on her clothes, her fingers fumbling with the buttons. The silence in the house pressed against her eardrums, suffocating in its intensity. She burst through the front door, the icy wind slapping her cheeks as she desperately scanned the empty landscape.

Nothing.

She slowly withdrew, the breeze slamming the door shut behind her with a finality that made her flinch. Her legs gave way, and she slid down the polished wood, her breath coming in short, painful gasps. He'd really left. Without a word, without a goodbye.

It was Penny's day off and Dovina and Nadie's absence on their shopping trip only amplified the emptiness. She thumped her head against the solid entry door, staring into the house she was forbidden to enter for five long years. Flickers of memories played across her thoughts, a house full of laughter and arguments, joy and sorrow. Now, echoing silence greeted her.

Then her mother's voice rose unbidden to her mind. *All I need is your father's love to keep me warm.*

She swallowed. Her mother would have happily lived in a straw hut as long as they were all together. This grand estate, this life of luxury, it wasn't what made a family.

Love. That's what made a family.

She'd foolishly believed that regaining her wealth would heal everything, but the gaping hole left by her family's death remained.

Only the love of someone who truly understood loss and still clung to hope could ever fill that void.

Her feet carried her to Nevander's suite before her mind could catch up. His scent of cloves and cedar enveloped her, a comfort she now craved like air. The large bed stood pristine in the dark paneled room, its military corners folded to perfection. But there, on the pillow, lay a folded piece of paper.

With trembling fingers, she snatched it up and moved to the window. The wan morning light barely illuminated the words, forcing her to squint:

Lady Kallessa,

For many years, your choices were taken from you. I refuse to partake in that. I've seen too many consequences to rob you of your agency, your independence. So, I'm leaving your future in your own capable hands.

A sob caught in her throat, equal parts gratitude and fear coursing through her veins.

You are strong and beautiful, and I know you will make good choices.

His faith in her both buoyed and terrified her. What if she wasn't worthy of such trust?

The choice is yours, Kallessa.

She closed her eyes, savoring the weight of those words, the freedom they represented after so much constraint and expectation. When she opened them again, determination blazed in her gaze.

But, if you do want to find me, I've left you with a map.

Her heart leapt, even as a bittersweet smile curved her lips. Of course he had.

Yours forevermore,

N

That single initial–N. It had sparked an adventure she never dreamed possible, introducing her to a man who'd awakened a longing she couldn't smother, no matter how hard she tried.

Another sheet fluttered to the floor–the map. As she unfolded it, a gasp escaped her lips. How had he managed to squeeze so much detail onto one page?

Among the trails and lines were all the things she and Nevander had shared. There was a little inn, shaped like a fat owl, its windows the large round eyes. A sparkling glass house among intricate hedges, a kidney-shaped lake with tiny trout jumping from the water.

Her eyes fell on the Ravenbluff estate, its bronze telescope aimed at a full moon.

A library teeming with tiny books and a looming fireplace. She laughed.

Sunu, along with other horses, galloping around the estate.

A lump formed in her throat as she spotted the long pass leading around a bend. There, standing tall and golden, was a lovingly rendered memorial bearing her family's name and crest.

Kallessa blinked back tears, not daring to mar this masterpiece. He'd created this just for her.

Everything they'd done together since they'd met. Every wonderful and crazy experience. As her gaze followed the winding road, it came to a fork.

To the right lay the Wynlar estate under a brilliant blue sky. A tiny figure of herself rode a spirited chestnut horse, her curls flying in the wind, eyes alight with joy and freedom. The detail was breathtaking, from her freckles to the determined set of her jaw. And that horse, its head tossing proudly, looked remarkably like Sunu.

To the left, a constellation shaped like a ship sailed across an inky sky. Below it stretched the Ederon sea, its waves gently lapping at the pale sand. And there, etched with unmistakable care, stood Nevander. His whimsical self-portrait made her laugh through her tears—barefoot and disheveled, hair tousled by an unseen breeze. But it was his outstretched hand that made her heart skip a beat, beckoning her to step right into the magical world he'd created.

Kallessa's eyes lifted from the paper, wonder replacing the sorrow in her gaze. For the first time in years, her life was truly her own. The path forward was hers to choose, even if the steps ahead remained shrouded in mystery.

She took a deep, steadying breath, her resolve hardening. No more drifting, no more letting fate dictate her course.

It was time to embrace her future. And the man who'd shown her how to hope again.

Forty-Seven

THE MOONLESS NIGHT ENVELOPED Kallessa as she slipped out of the estate, Nevander's map clutched in her hand. Her heart raced, each step carrying her closer to a future she both yearned for and feared.

The rhythmic crash of waves called to her, growing louder as she neared the shore. Salt-laden air filled her lungs, grounding her in this moment of truth. As she rounded the cove, her breath caught.

There he stood.

Nevander's silhouette cut a striking figure against the star-studded sky, his gaze fixed on the vast, dark sea. The breeze ruffled his tawny hair, his cloak billowing gently behind him. For a heartbeat, Kallessa hesitated in the shadows, drinking in the sight of the man who'd upended her world. Who'd shown her she wasn't just a small girl in a small world, powerless to make a difference.

And she refused to hide any longer.

As she approached, the sound of the waves seemed to hush, as if holding its breath.

Nevander turned, his eyes finding hers in the darkness. The gentle smile that tugged at his lips sent a flood of warmth through her chest. "Kallessa," he breathed, her name a caress on the night air.

She came to stand beside him, the cool night air whispering around them. For a moment, they simply existed together in silence, the world reduced to the sound of the tide. Two lovers, gone to sea.

“Do you know the legend of Enkin’s ship?” Nevander’s low voice broke the spell, his gaze drifting to the constellations above.

Kallessa shook her head, following his gaze to the familiar star pattern sailors used for navigation.

“In the earliest days of seafaring, when the world was shrouded in a blanket of undiscovered waters, there sailed a captain known as Enkin the Wayfinder, known for his unwavering compass and an unquenchable thirst for discovery. But one night, the winds unleashed their fury upon the waters, challenging the resolve of even the mightiest sailors.”

His voice took on a wistful quality, as if he could see the events unfolding before them. “All ships sought refuge, all but the Celestial Mariner. Enkin steered his vessel directly into the tempest, for he carried with him the most treasured of all treasures, a heart of pure gold, a gift for the queen. But the tempest was unrelenting, and he fought the entire night with the sea.”

Kallessa leaned in, captivated by the tale and the soft cadence of Nevander’s words.

“And as morning broke over the eastern horizon, its golden rays shone on the empty waters where the storm raged the night before. The Celestial Mariner and its captain were gone without a trace, swallowed by the unforgiving sea. Yet in the royal palace, the queen’s heart, once heavy with grief, grew stronger with each passing moment. Somehow, against all odds, Enkin had completed his destined task. Though he’d perished in the storm’s fury, his heart of gold had restored the queen’s own heart, mending the wound of tragedy that had plagued her for so long.”

“No one knows whether the ship rests at the bottom of the sea, or sailed into the stars, but after that fateful night, a new constellation appeared in the north, an unwavering guide home to any sailor that has lost his way.”

Nevander’s gaze met hers, his eyes shining with an intensity that stole her breath. “You,” he grasped her hands, his calloused fingers enveloping her skin as he brought her knuckles to his lips, “are my constellation, my guiding light in this world. You helped me find my way back from the dark night.”

An ache echoed through her at his caress, her breath catching in her throat. She’d missed that touch.

“I am broken, Kallessa,” Nevander murmured, his voice a hoarse whisper that seemed to emanate from the depths of his soul. His intense gaze bore into her, eyes shimmering with a haunted sorrow that spoke of unspeakable

burdens. “The war has left scars that may take years to mend, wounds that cut far deeper than any blade.”

He reached out, fingers tracing the delicate curve of her cheek. “But if you will stand by my side, I will love you with every fiber of my being, cherish you as the most precious of treasures, for as long as we live upon this earth. I will fight for you, protect you with my dying breath against any who dare threaten your happiness.”

His words ignited a yearning so profound, so visceral, that it threatened to consume her entirely. In that moment, with the stars as their witness and the ocean breeze caressing her skin, Kallessa’s heart found its home within the depths of his gaze. A sense of belonging washed over her, banishing the shadows that had lingered for far too long.

In him she’d found wildness and freedom, safety and security, a dizzying paradox that both thrilled and grounded her. She wanted all of it. All of him.

“Sometimes I think it’s our brokenness that makes us realize what’s truly important,” Kallessa began, her mind struggling to convey what her heart felt. The words tumbled forth, raw and unvarnished.

“After my family died, I drifted through life as a lonely shadow, merely existing from one day to the next. I thought if only I had my old life back, everything would be fine. But I can never go back there, and… I don’t want to.”

As she spoke those words into existence, she realized just how true they were. “When we first met at that inn, I was lost, adrift in a sea of grief and self-doubt. But there was something about you, something that drew me in despite my attempts to push you away.” A wistful smile tugged at her lips at the memory. “You understood that dark place inside of me, and you never tried to belittle it. You accepted me on a level I didn’t even accept myself.”

She met his intense gaze, those green eyes silvered by the starlight. “You’ve freed me to forge my own path. To set sail for uncharted waters. But I don’t want that freedom without you.” Kallessa swallowed and studied the face of the man that had changed her world. “I’d rather spend a lifetime putting each other’s broken bits back together than another second without you.”

He released a gasping breath and pulled her into his arms, kissing her with such tenderness she felt she might shatter. His lips traced a path down her neck, drawing a hum of pleasure from her. Nevander raised his head and spun her around, dancing to the ebb and flow of the ocean’s song.

After a few moments, or it could have been hours, Nevander pulled back, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Did you know there is another verse to 'The Ballad of Ederon Sea'?"

She grinned, perplexed at his change of topic. "No, I didn't."

He pulled her tightly to him, lifting her toes from the sand, and whispered the lyrics into her ear.

If we both end up
at the bottom of the sea
We'll grow gills and fishy tails
and dine on seaweed tea

We'll make our home
in a clamshell shack
and hold each other forever
Never looking back

Kallessa burst out laughing, gripping his shoulders for balance. She'd never be able to hear that song again without his silly lyrics tacked onto the end. "I think you should stick with map making and leave the ballads to the professionals."

Nevander chuckled, pulling her close once more as they swayed together on the beach. His fingers traced patterns on her back as he murmured, "Let's create our own journeys, then, ones filled with adventures beyond what any ballad could capture."

"Yes," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his waist and laying her head against his chest. She felt his strength, his warmth, his beating heart. Kallessa knew better than to believe in happily ever after—every day would bring new challenges, but if she could do it with this brave, loving man by her side, together, they could conquer anything.

As the stars twinkled above and the waves lapped at the shore, they stood entwined, two broken souls made whole in each other's arms. Their story was just beginning, and the vast, unknown future stretched before them like the endless sea—full of possibilities, adventures, and, most of all, love.

Epilogue

DAWN'S FIRST LIGHT CREPT through the windows as Castien pulled on his leathers. He winced, the once-snug garments now hanging loose on his wasted frame. A stark reminder of his weakness.

Never again.

The cool halls echoed with his determined footsteps as he strode to the sparring ring. The estate slumbered, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing within its prince.

At the entrance, Declan's hulking form blocked the doorway. Steam curled from the mug in his massive hands, the rich aroma of coffee filling the air. His eyebrows shot up at the sight of Castien, but he remained silent.

Castien's jaw clenched. The weight of his mother's injuries and a traitor's escape pressed down on him, fueling a fire in his gut. No more weakness. No more failure.

"Declan," Castien growled, shouldering past the guard.

Heavy footsteps followed him into the ring. Castien turned, meeting Declan's questioning gaze.

"Yes, my lord?" The guard's voice was cautious, his features carefully blank.

Castien's eyes hardened, his voice low and dangerous. "I want you to kick my ass."

A wicked grin spread across Declan's face, a predatory glint in his eye. "It would be my pleasure, my lord."

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED *The Lady of Teansong*. Your support means the world to me, and if Kallessa and Nevander's story brought you joy, intrigue, or even a few sleepless nights, I would be so grateful if you could take a moment to leave a review.

Reviews help independent authors like me connect with new readers and continue creating stories to share. Whether it's a quick note or a detailed reflection, your thoughts truly matter.

You can leave your review on Amazon, Goodreads, or your preferred platform. Thank you for being part of this journey!

With gratitude,
Angie

About the Author

Angie fell in love with storytelling on the back porch swing as a child, listening to her older sister bring the worlds of David Eddings' Belgariad to life. Those cherished moments sparked a lifelong passion for creating stories and the fantastical worlds they inhabit.

When not lost in her own magical worlds, you'll likely find her sipping Assam tea from her ever-growing collection of chipped china cups, or wandering through estate sales "rescuing" vintage treasures. Her craft room is a wonderland of chaos where half-finished projects and fully-formed dreams run wild.

Angie lives in North Mississippi with her amazing husband and their literary supervisor—a surprisingly well-behaved cat who insists on approving every chapter. Her stories blend the enchantment of fairy tales with contemporary heart, where love and magic intertwine—much like the hearts of dreamers who dare to believe in both.

Connect with Angie and explore her writing journey:

- Website: AngieOReilly.com
- Facebook: AuthorAngieOReilly
- Instagram: Author.Angie_OReilly

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Angie